AFTER DINNER Conversation

Philosophy | Ethics Short Story Literary Magazine

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ADC58

P.05 Is life always perfect when you have enough glitter-stones?
P.14 Can you improve the world by eliminating your worst thoughts?
P.33 Is a hard truth better than a soft lie?
P.50 Can protest groups be your dating pool?

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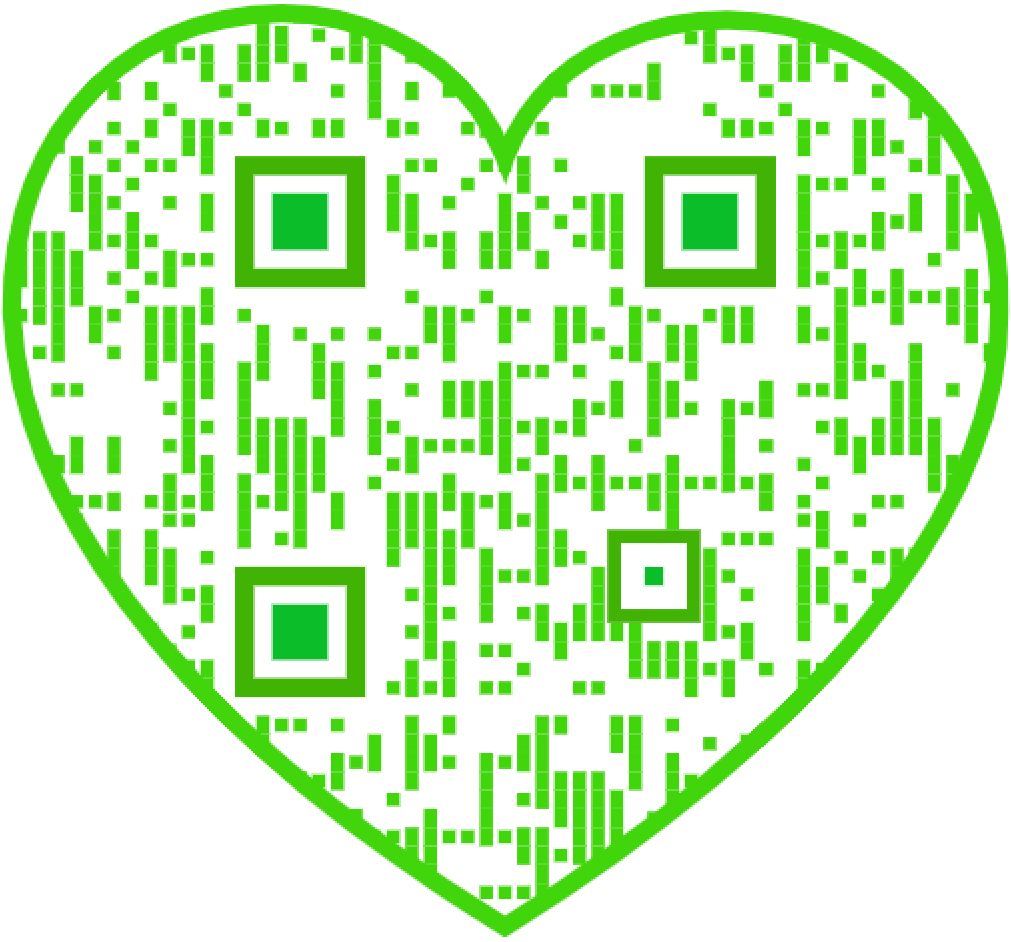

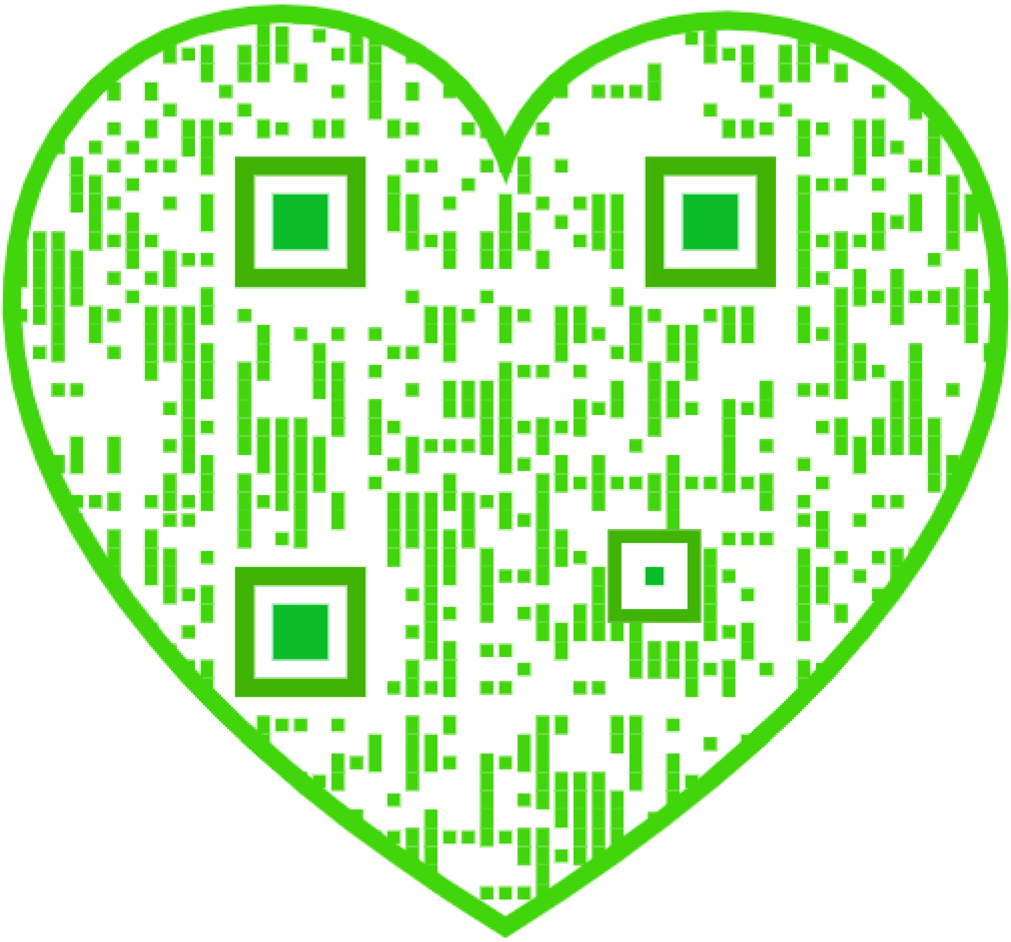

After Dinner Conversation Magazine – April 2025

This magazine publishes fictional stories that explore ethical and philosophical questions in an informal manner. The purpose of these stories is to generate thoughtful discussion in an open and easily accessible manner.

Names, characters, businesses, organizations, places, events, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental. The magazine is published monthly in print and electronic format.

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After Dinner Conversation *is an independent nonprofit publisher. We believe in fostering meaningful discussions among friends, family, and students to enhance humanity through truth-seeking, reflection, and respectful debate. To achieve this, we publish philosophical and ethical short story fiction accompanied by discussion questions.*

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From the Editor

This issue has quite a few stories about the various ways we limit expression in ourselves and the expression of others.

Of course, sometimes we censor ourselves to fit in. Sometimes we revise our own truth so we better fit who we wish we were. And, of course, society sometimes limits the self-expression of others because it upsets social networks, cultural norms, hierarchy, or our own self-identity. And I'm forced to wonder, why do we do this?

This is going to sound stupid, but it reminds me of an open hand, palm up. In fact, I physically do this sometimes to center myself when I am stressed. To me it means, "I have nothing, I control nothing, and yet, I am full." Conversely, we all know someone whose hands are technically "full," yet needs more.

More cars, more praise, and more forcing others to think, live, and speak as they believe others should. It's not enough that they try to have everything they want, but to be "full" they also need a world that is as they expect it to be.

Maybe that is what censorship is, an extension of the emotional hole in yourself you can never fill that extends to trying to censor the world around you.

Oddly enough, this is a thought that has never occurred to me until reading the stories in this issue. I guess that means we picked good ones.

Kolby Granville – Editor

The Survival Artist

Peter Mare

* * *

Content Disclosure: None

* * *

In the *Land of Get and Have*, Eve had to work hard to survive.

She slept in the open, under the sky, every night. But she was never cold because she had all she needed to stay warm. Above her, a million stars swam slowly together in a sea of light and shadow, and the moon passed through its phases in a gentle, constant rhythm. But Eve never noticed the stars and she took no comfort in the moon's rhythmic journey.

For even at night, she thought only of her search.

By day, she scanned the forest whose leaves danced together in gentle breezes. She searched through the desert of brightly colored sands and stone. And she scoured the shores of the turquoise sea.

But Eve never saw the dancing leaves, or the textures of the land, or even the shimmering water. For her, the work of survival required all of her attention. And in the *Land of Get and Have*, to survive meant finding and keeping glitter-stones.

No one knew how long it had been this way. But all the people of *Get and Have* depended on the precious and rare glitter-stones for survival. And no one was better at finding them than Eve.

The magic of the glitter-stones was powerful and undeniable. A person with enough stones never grew hungry, never felt the chill of a cold night, and never had to endure the ache of loneliness. They felt no pain, no sadness, and no fear. No fear that is, except the fear of losing a glitter-stone.

Eve felt this fear through her bones. It consumed her when she slept. It burned in her when she woke. But she did not let it paralyze her. On the contrary, she used it to fuel her search. It was through her determination that she had become more skilled than anyone at finding and keeping glitter-stones.

Her hunting tricks were secrets she held close. And the most important skill she had learned was training her eyes to ignore everything but glitter-stones. She had even learned to look right through trees and rocks to see the stone hiding on the other side.

But the days when Eve could easily find glitter-stones under rocks or beside trees were long gone. Now the best place to find them was in the hands of other people. And because of this, Eve had learned how to see right through people to the stones they concealed in their pockets.

The best time to find stones was after dark when they would stop moving and settle down for the night. If Eve crept very slowly and quietly, she could take them for her collection before they had the chance to run away.

In this way, Eve had collected more glitter-stones than anyone else, and as long as she kept searching and getting, she would have all she needed to survive.

* * *

Then one day something very strange happened. It had been a long time since Eve had seen another person. Glitter-stones were all she needed, and they were the only thing she noticed.

But on this day, when she had her head hung low, scanning the ground in the vain hope of finding her treasure, something that was not a glitter-stone caught her eye, and Eve looked up.

The sudden movement made her dizzy and she nearly toppled over. But what confused her even more was the awareness that she was standing on the shore of a great sea. And, as she peered down the beach, she saw that a person was moving toward her.

The person was doing the strangest thing. He or she, for Eve could not tell which, was dancing in the waves. Eve blinked several times for the sight was so confounding. She tried to look down to continue her search, but something made her look up again.

As the stranger stopped dancing and turned to walk up the beach, toward the forest, Eve realized what was wrong. The stranger carried no glitter-stones!

How could it be? How could this stranger survive without a single glitter-stone to take away the pangs of hunger, the cold of night, and the various other aches that were harder to describe, and whose names Eve had long since forgotten?

In a flash of insight, Eve realized that this stranger must have a kind of magic that kept glitter-stones hidden. Perhaps a magic bag that concealed them from even Eve's trained eyes.

Her curiosity turned to suspicion and then to anger and she decided that she would follow this stranger to discover the secret of their magic.

Eve followed close behind but was careful to stay hidden behind trees and rocks. It was very disorientating because suddenly she had to see the very things she had learned to ignore.

After a journey of some distance, the stranger stopped along the banks of a trickling stream. The stranger sat down and pulled out a bag and started searching through it.

Aha! Eve thought. That must be the magic bag.

And just as Eve was about to leap out and confront them, the stranger pulled something from the bag. But it was not a glitter-stone.

At first, the thing seemed so useless and insignificant that Eve couldn't focus on it. After some time, her eyes adjusted and she saw that the stranger was holding a stick, an ordinary stick with the end cut to a fine point and blacked in a fire.

Next, the stranger approached a grove of birch trees and started collecting fallen bark. Then they walked to the stream and collected a pile of stones that they placed near the birch bark. Slowly and with great care not to crack the bark, the stranger set the pieces in the water and placed stones along their edges to hold them flat. Next, the stranger began to collect wood to make a fire.

Eve was perplexed and distraught to see the stranger labor long and hard searching for dry wood. Why do they need a fire to keep warm? Could it be that there really are no glitter-stones hiding in that bag?

After finally starting a fire, the stranger turned to collecting leaves for tea and nibbling on nuts and dried fruit. After the sun had set, the stranger wrapped up in a blanket and fell asleep by the fire.

Hours passed. Once she was sure the stranger was in a deep sleep, Eve crept down to the fire. She snatched the bag and slinked back to her hiding place. Once hidden, she shoved her hand in and searched frantically for a glitter-stone. But there was nothing in the bag except flat pieces of birch bark. Outraged, Eve threw the bag to the ground. She was so confused. How did this stranger survive without glitter-stones?

Why would anyone choose to toil in the cold water just to flatten pieces of bark? Why spend hours building a fire for warmth and searching for food when a glitter-stone could take away hunger and cold?

But what confused Eve the most, more than anything she had seen the stranger do, were the questions themselves, and that they suddenly mattered. Why were her precious glitter-stones not relieving the growing ache in her heart? Why was their magic not working to quiet the curiosity stirring in her mind? Perhaps the magic this stranger wielded was greater and more dangerous than Eve had imagined.

It was at this point that something caught Eve’s eye. In the moonlight, she saw that one of the birch barks had fallen from the bag.

As she knelt down to look more closely, she gasped at what she saw. Staring back at her, in shades of black charcoal against the white of the bark, was the image of her own face.

Eve's heart stopped. She could not contain herself and a cry burst from her mouth like no sound she had ever made before.

She grabbed the bag of bark drawings and ran. She ran without stopping. Though it was night, the moon was full and she saw it. And she saw its light on every tree and every stone. She didn't trip or stumble, and the more she ran, the more she found her stride. She ran long and hard through the forest until she reached the shore. And as she emerged from the trees, she saw the first glimmer of sunlight rising above the sea. It was the first sunrise she had noticed in a very long time.

Eve collapsed onto the sand. It was cold underneath her, but the first rays from the sun were already warming her skin. She looked at the bag that was still in her hands and pulled out the stack of birch-bark drawings. She stared at the image of her face. It was the face of someone so focused on what she wanted that she couldn't see the artist sitting in front of her, sketching her likeness.

There was no peace in that face.

And Eve's was not the only face. Other drawings held the faces of people with a similar expression. But there were also people who looked directly at the artist. Some of these faces were smiling, some crying, some laughing, some with expressions that were a mystery to Eve.

That was not all. There were strange creatures that Eve did not recognize. Some with four legs, some with wings, some with no legs at all. And there were leaves and flowers and the shore of a great sea.

It was at this moment that Eve realized she did not have her glitter-stones. She must have dropped them as she was running, as she was finding her way through the moonlit forest.

She held her breath and waited for it. The feeling of panic, of terror, that she knew would rise up any moment.

But the panic did not come.

Instead, she found herself looking at the light on the sea. She stood and walked to the water's edge. She let the waves reach up to her toes. The water was cold, but she didn't mind. And the color of the water was starting to shine through. That color had always been there, but now, somehow, it was as if Eve was seeing it for the first time. And in that color, she saw something new, something she didn't understand.

She knew she must find the artist again. She didn't know why, but she yearned to watch this stranger sketch her world. She had run so far in the night. And she didn't know how to find her way in this new world that she saw all around her.

And then it hit her. She felt hungry and lonely. It was almost more than she could bear, worse than the feeling of being without her glitter-stones. But Eve already knew that, even if she could find her old stones, their magic would no longer work for her.

All around her more and more of a world appeared. She walked along the shore and soon came to the remnants of a fire. The coals were cold and she could see that whoever built the fire had not been there for days.

But in the ashes was a sharpened stick with one end blackened by coals. And leading from the fire was a faint trail of footsteps pointing into the woods.

Without a moment's hesitation, and with her head held high, so she could see the path ahead, Eve disappeared into the forest.

* * *

Discussion Questions

1. What are the similarities and differences between the glitter-stones and money?
2. The story says, “She had even learned to look right through trees and rocks to see the stone hiding on the other side.” What does this mean in relation to the allegory? What about when the story says, “Eve had learned how to see right through people to the stones they concealed in their pockets.”?
3. Eve says she saw the stranger “dancing in the waves” and later “toil in the cold water.” If you asked the stranger, how might they describe these two actions? Would you draw such a clear distinction between “dancing” and “toiling”?
4. The narrator tells us “...even if she could find her old stones, their magic would no longer work for her.” Why wouldn’t the magic work for Eve again if they worked for her in the past?
5. Eve uses the glitter-stones to keep herself from getting cold, while the stranger uses fire from collected wood. If both require work, what is the difference between the two methods of staying warm?

* * *

Reformation

Chelsea Chong

* * *

Content Disclosure: None

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Eve stood on the soaked pavement outside the store. She balanced her umbrella in one hand, wrapped her coat tighter, and pulled her phone from her pocket. Her hands trembled. The black clouds above were playing a game with her, exhaling their frozen breath, trying to catch her by the umbrella and blow her onto the street. She steadied herself and read the text from Alima.

Don't do it E. Come round this afternoon. We'll talk x.

Eve waved her hand over the thin face of the glowing screen to turn it black and slid the phone inside her handbag next to a battered copy of *Jane Eyre* and a letter from the university.

Sorry Al, Eve thought. It's for the best.

When she pushed through the glass door and walked inside, the flash of 3D screens invaded her vision. All six walls of the hexagonal space were lined floor to ceiling with screens broadcasting famous Viewer channels. Eve recognized some of the Influencers as she scanned the scrolling commentary floating over their enormous faces. Sound poured down from the ceiling, which was divided into six triangles; each a colossal speaker pumping out the audio of the screen below. Words filled the air and forced oxygen from the room.

Eve straightened her shoulders and was contemplating moving further in as a young man burst into view. He was around her age, mid-to-late twenties, and his mouth stole her focus. The flashing screens seemed to reflect off the enamel of his giant teeth.

So very large, Eve thought.

“That is just the kind of cruel and insensitive thought we are happy to help you eradicate,” the young man said and promptly shut his mouth.

“I’m so sorry.” Eve glanced at his nametag. “Francis. I didn’t realize we’d started.” She looked around the busy store. “Actually, I thought I needed to buy a Viewer first.”

“It’s an inbuilt function of this immersive space,” he said. “If you look closely at the bottom of the front door, you’ll see the fine print. By entering, you’ve given unequivocal permission for access.”

He spoke so rapidly Eve had to lean forward and turn one ear toward him to understand through the background noise. “I didn’t realize,” she said.

“Never mind. The point is—” Francis held his arms out wide like a ringmaster to an expectant audience, all consciousness of his teeth forgotten. “Eve McKinnon, you are here! Welcome, welcome, welcome.” He sang the words, the sound booming and resounding throughout the store, somehow rising above the competing voices. Eve ducked her head and stared at her hands.

Francis pulled a transparent card from the back of his tight black chinos and unfolded it into an A4 Flexi-glass tablet. “Now, your referral is from…” he consulted the screen, “the Melbourne Tertiary Institute for Universal Enhancement.”

Shuffling closer to hear, Eve was met by the spicy scent of his cologne. “Sorry. What did you say?”

“The university referred you?” he shouted.

“Yes. I work—”

“You work there? Such an important career. Now, the referral says you’re in need of a Viewer?” He leaned toward her, eyes wide. “Eve, this is a fantastic life choice.”

“Thank you, I—”

“Are you looking to purchase and install today?”

A sudden sense of dread fell over Eve, and she took a step back. She *wanted* this. She really did, but it was all moving so fast, and she hadn’t had a moment to get her bearings. “I… I just have a few questions.”

“Of course, of course, you do, Eve, an academic like you. The curious type.”

“Well, I’m in the Linguistics Department and—”

Francis held up a hand. “Sorry. Feedback coming through.” He gazed over her head, squinting and nodding. “Yes. Okay. Yes. I see.” He closed his right eye and touched a fingertip to his eyelid. “Command. Input,” he said, staring one-eyed into a far corner of the room. “Hi, everyone. My deepest apologies for that horrible micro-episode of stereotyping and non-inclusivity. Of course, so right of you to note that people who haven't undertaken tertiary study can be inquisitive and that some who have done university-level study may not be so inclined. So valid. Thank you again Ref Collective for your wise guidance helping-me-be-a-better-me." He dropped his finger from his eyelid, blinked a few times, and ran a hand through his hair before he noticed Eve was peering up at him.

"Sorry. Did I get you in trouble?" she asked.

He snorted, and Eve saw a moment of fear sweep across his face. He brushed his fingers over his nose as if to stuff the sound back in and readjusted his form-fitting jacket. "It's not about getting told off. This, my dear, is the answer to social harmony."

Francis walked over to a glass bench and picked up a small box that fit in his palm. The box was impossibly dark. As Eve studied it, she realized it seemed to absorb light. It didn't appear three-dimensional at all but like the sheer absence of matter. Drawn toward the box, Eve reached out to touch it, but before she could make contact, Francis pulled it away.

"In this box," he said, "is your personalized Viewer; the gateway to a more inclusive, caring, and universally likable version of Eve. I'm thrilled you got to see a live demonstration. I've been using a Viewer for the past year, and I've enhanced my inclusivity by fifty-two percent."

Fifty-two percent, Eve thought. That's positive. That would make a difference in the world, surely. To her left, she caught sight of a famous Influencer on the screen, sobbing into his hands.

Francis consulted the tablet. "So, you're looking for an annual subscription to our premium package? I used your income to calculate the cost." He tapped the screen. "It'll be ten thousand per annum. Very reasonable."

"Ten thousand dollars?" Eve's heart leaped into her throat.

"Just ten percent of your wage. The same rate all consumers pay. Forgive me a moment." He put a finger against his eyelid. "Flag. To be addressed later." He turned back to Eve. "To give you some perspective, the actual cost to provide the service is double that, but, for a limited time, the federal government is footing half the bill. Such an opportunity." He spun his tablet to face her. The screen displayed a rotating diagram of the cost mapped out next to expected gains in social harmony.

"I still have some questions." Eve fought against the fear that snaked through her belly. "I mean, it sounds fantastic and necessary for, you know, social progress, and I sort of know how it works. Most of my colleagues have them already—"

"Fantastic."

"I'm just wondering if—"

"Here." Francis handed her the tablet. "Have a read of this. It should answer most of your questions. I'll just pop over to that customer." He glided past Eve, arms in an open V, roaring his welcome song.

Eve bent over the tablet and tried to concentrate, but found her attention pulled away by Influencers, laughing, crying, or ranting about their offensive thoughts. She pulled a pair of old-fashioned headphones from her handbag and put them on, muffling the external noise. The moment carried her out of the chaos of the store and into the kitchen of her childhood home. She could see her mum, reaching over a pot of spaghetti to turn off the buzzing range hood; voices that were raised above the incessant hum grew quiet, and Eve savored the sudden blissful silence.

Her handbag vibrated, snapping her back into the present. She checked her phone and found two missed calls from Alima but ignored them. Eve turned instead to the words on the tablet, which were pulsing in muted tones of gray and green.

The adaptation of your inner life is the next step in social evolution. You can become the kind and accepting person you were born to be, Eve McKinnon. At Viewer, we know that discrimination and social unrest are birthed in the deepest recesses of your mind. Hidden in your thoughts, they percolate and fester, growing into words and actions. The answer: Eradication of those destructive thought patterns. Neuroscience has shown us that neural superhighways can be deconstructed through heightened awareness and conscious choice. The Viewer provides you access to the Reformation Collective, a team of trained specialists with you 24/7, enabling you to choose more sensitive, loving, and inclusive thoughts.

This sounds incredible, Eve thought. This was what she needed. She'd been trying so hard to be a good person lately, but she just had so much inbuilt prejudice.

When she looked up, Francis was standing close by, mouth moving. Eve removed her headphones. "No," Francis shouted. "Multiple scientific studies have shown that there are absolutely no adverse neurological side effects."

"What?"

"Not you, Eve. I'm still accessing that customer over there. Wait. I'll switch over." He placed a finger behind his right ear. "Done. Okay. Great. It seems like you've made your decision."

"Um. Maybe. Sorry," she yelled, her throat dry. "I'm having trouble concentrating with all the noise."

"The noise?" Francis clasped his hands together, his index fingers pointing up like the steeple of an ancient church. "Oh. The input? From the channels?" He looked over at a couple who had just pushed through the glass door. "Don't worry, Eve. It's statistically proven that people who adopt a Viewer increase their sensory input threshold by over sixty percent."

Eve wrapped her arms around herself, trying to still the growing chaos inside. "I just need to know, do the refs review, you know, *every* thought?"

"Every thought? Oh, my God, Eve. How would that be possible?" Francis glanced over his shoulder, gesturing to a colleague to attend to the new couple wandering the edges of the room. "Command. Input. Apologies all for the misuse of the name of a deity. So out of line and offensive to those who hold an allegiance to supernatural beings, which simultaneously do and do not exist. No, that's not how it works. Eve, I'm talking to you. The algorithm is set to flag thoughts that are out of line." He took the tablet from her and swiped right three times. "See. The values quad, just here, shows you the guiding code of the ref collective: inclusivity, acceptance, sensitivity, and harmony."

"Okay. But is it on *all* the time? What about if I need—"

"No. No. No. No." Francis put a hand on her back and guided her to a far wall, away from the other customers. "There's a mute function and a sleep function. Really, Eve, studies have proven time and time again that the mind flourishes using a Viewer. Look, I shouldn't be saying this, but I can see you're a bit anxious. Honestly, I don't know how people are going to get by without one of these in the *very* near future."

Eve's hands felt clammy, so she wiped them on her trousers. “What do you mean?”

“Well, the university has *‘strongly recommended’* you adopt a Viewer?”

“Yes.”

“I’d take that *very* seriously.”

“But—”

“Do you ever plan on doing more study? Or one day having children and sending them to school?”

“Yes, but what does that have to do—”

“I have it on good authority that all public institutions will be *strongly* inclined toward people with Viewers.”

She noticed his hand was still resting on her back and stepped slightly away to break contact. “Strongly inclined? I’m sorry, but what does that mean?”

“Eve, you’ve got to realize that this…” he pointed at the space behind his ear, “will put you on the right side of history.”

* * *

Eve stepped out of the store and was hit by a torrent of rain. It was mid-afternoon, and the sky had darkened while she’d been inside. She covered her phone with her coat and sent a message:

Al. Don’t worry so much! It’ll be fine. I’ll be at your place soon x.

Realizing she’d left her umbrella behind, she turned back but stopped as the glow of screens shimmered through the glass. Handbag clutched against her chest, she turned away instead and ran along the slippery footpath in the direction of the bus stop, boots diving in and out of puddles.

The bus stop was deserted. Eve dropped onto the metal bench, leaned back against the graffitied wall, and closed her eyes, listening to the crack and boom of the brewing storm. Images of Influencers flickered behind her eyelids, so she opened them again and rifled in her bag to find her copy of *Jane Eyre*. Transported by the familiar pages, she sat in front of the fire with Jane, transfixed by Mr. Rochester's speech.

"...in time, I think you will learn to be natural with me, as I find it impossible to be conventional with you; and then your looks and movements will have more vivacity and variety than they dare offer now. I see at intervals the glance of a curious sort of bird through the close-set bars of a cage: a vivid, restless, resolute captive is there; were it but free, it would soar cloud-high..."

DING!

Eve was pulled from the fireside by the sound that ricocheted from the base of her skull, over her head and reverberated in her eye sockets. She dropped the book into a pool of water at her feet and heard a clear, high-pitched female voice say, "Eve, we have some feedback for you."

When Eve touched the vibrating metal crescent hidden behind her right ear, a stream of voices filled her mind.

"Sabrina here. Hi, Eve. So great to have you in the community. Just a little feedback on your choice of novel. In this passage, Rochester is committing a serious violation. He's totally mansplaining, as if he's in charge of Jane's inner life. Horrendous."

"Zali here. So true, Sabrina. Eve, maybe you can steer clear of novels that celebrate misogynistic psychopaths who keep mentally unwell women locked in attics? Just a thought."

"Mylo here. Classic patriarchal trope of a man '*unlocking*' a woman. Eve, you're better than this. We know you can get to a higher plane of thought than these outdated gender stereotypes."

Eve tucked the wet book back into her bag and stared at the red bricks of the office building across the road, trying to absorb the disembodied words.

The high-pitched female voice returned. "Would you like to address this feedback now or flag it for later, Eve?"

Eve tried to catch her breath but couldn't. Her heart pounded hard against her chest. "Now, I think. Yes, now." She closed her right eye and touched her eyelid. "Command. Input. Thanks for that. The thing is, this is my favorite book and I know some of the concepts are outdated, and the language can be a bit off, but I read it for the quality of the prose and the image—"

DING.

"Sabrina here. Soooo sorry to interrupt. I know you're new to this, but it isn't so much a *conversation* as it is *feedback*. Submit to the process, Eve. We'll give you another go."

The female voice came back, calm and robotic. "Would you like to address this feedback now or flag it for later, Eve?"

Eve sat motionless and stunned.

"Would you like to address this feedback now or flag it for later, Eve?"

"Later," Eve whispered.

"Thank you, Eve. You have," the voice paused, "twelve hours to address this feedback. Have a wonderful day."

Her mind fell silent.

* * *

The bus Eve caught to Alima's apartment was packed with wet bodies and the windows were clouded with steam. Eve found a seat next to a heating vent and rubbed her hands together in front of the stream of warm air.

As the bus pulled into the next stop, an older woman boarded and stood in front of Eve holding onto a yellow pole. The woman wore a burgundy pants suit and held a Louis Vuitton bag at her side. Eve rose and attempted to wipe some of the water from her seat so the woman could take her place, but the woman stood straighter and, with a slight shake of her head, turned away.

DING.

Eve fell back into the chair as the sound rang through her skull.

“Eve, we have some feedback for you.”

She hesitated before touching the crescent.

“Zali here. Try not to assume people need your help, Eve, particularly because of their age.”

“Mylo here. Yes! Totally agree! Ageism is not the way to go, Evie.”

“Sabrina here. Good intentions aren’t enough to truly eradicate discrimination, Eve. When you look at an older person, try to think about what they *can* do rather than their limitations.”

Eve hung her head and tucked her face into her shoulder. “Command. Input. Hey guys. Thank you so much for pointing out that… that error in judgment. No, ageism isn’t a good thing at all. So true.”

Silence.

She tapped the crescent twice.

“Viewer feedback muted for ten minutes,” the voice said. “Twenty minutes of mute mode remaining today.”

Eve rested her temple on the foggy window, breath coming in rapid, shallow spurts, fingertips tingling.

Calm down, she told herself. *This is a good thing, Eve. Becoming a better person is hard, but it's necessary.*

She tried to slow her breathing but couldn't, so she put one hand on her chest and applied pressure. When that didn't work, Eve hung her head as far between her knees as she could, cupped her hands over her mouth, and breathed loudly.

"Command. Input," she heard the stylish older lady say. "Thank you kindly for your feedback. I will take that on. No more labeling people crazy because they're hyperventilating on public transport."

* * *

Eve stood in the hallway in front of Alima's apartment. Outside, the storm had begun to blow over. Eve tapped the crescent three times.

"Viewer in sleep mode. Eight hours of sleep mode remaining today."

Eve knocked on the door and Alima answered wearing tattered gray track pants and an oversized hoodie, Sara perched on her hip. The pressure in Eve's chest dissipated just seeing their faces.

"Come in. Quick. Don't stand out there." Alima grabbed Eve by the elbow and ushered her inside.

Eve laughed and removed her dripping shoes and socks. "What's up with you?"

The floor of the small, inner-city apartment was made of wooden boards, but Alima and Mohammad had softened it with thick plush rugs that swallowed Eve's bare feet.

Alima poked her head into the hallway, looked left and right, then shut the door. "I dunno. Weird stuff has been happening all day. My neighbor, Glenys, with the poodle, has stopped speaking to us, but I hear her mumbling in the hallway and it's freaking me out."

Eve took in the familiar objects that decorated the room: the old piano, the antique record player, the eclectic array of art that lined the walls.

"One of the dads from my parents' group told me he covered all their windows with tin foil," Alima said.

"Oh, that's crazy," Eve laughed.

"I know. I know."

A painting caught Eve's eye. Framed in gold, it depicted a vast crowd packed close together; a sea of bodies clothed in white, gathered around the Holy Kaaba in Mecca. The white paint was smudged, giving the impression that the crowd was circling the towering black cube. Though she must have walked past it countless times, Eve felt she'd never seen it before.

"You okay?" Alima asked.

"Yeah. Yeah. Fine." Eve broke away from the picture.

Alima handed the baby to Eve and bent to pick up her blind cat, which had wedged itself into a corner. "I agree tin foil is crazy, *but* we don't know how this technology works. We don't know if they can somehow beam into people's homes." Alima sat down on a bulging sofa and laid the cat across her lap.

Eve's stomach tightened, and she said a silent prayer of thanks to the universe that she'd put her Viewer on sleep mode. Eventually, she'd tell Alima, but not yet. Her friend didn't understand what it was like to be ignorant and insensitive. Alima never seemed to misunderstand or judge people too quickly. She was consistently kind and thoughtful, and maybe that's why she didn't understand that Eve needed a Viewer. Once Eve started to become a better person, then she'd have evidence to convince Alima it was a good thing.

Alima nuzzled her cat’s neck, making it purr. “Well, I’m just relieved you didn’t get one today.”

“Why are you so against it?” Eve kept her eyes on baby Sara, who was grabbing at Eve’s hair. “You’re kind. You’d have no trouble.”

Alima rose, went to the kitchen, and returned with a letter in hand. “From the university.”

Eve took it, scanned the words, and her stomach fell. “They can’t fire you.”

Alima sunk back onto the couch. The cat dropped down from her lap and wobbled off into the hallway.

“You’ve done nothing wrong,” Eve said.

“New legislation.”

“They can fire you for not getting a Viewer?”

“Yep. They say I’m not aligned with their values.”

“That’s insane. They can’t do that.” Eve shook her head. Her Viewer seemed to burn behind her ear.

Sara cried.

“She’s hungry again,” Alima said.

“You’re seriously willing to give up your career over this?”

“I’m not giving it up. They’re taking it away.” Alima took the baby from Eve and returned to the kitchen.

Eve followed. “I heard that schools might not take kids with non-Viewer parents. Could you do that to Sara?”

Outside, a stream of police cars shot past with their sirens blaring. Sara wailed.

“It’s okay sweetie.” Alima kissed the baby’s cheek and placed her in a high chair. “Have you thought this through, Eve? I mean, really considered the trajectory of it?”

“Oh, my God. Al—” Eve held her breath as she realized her error and waited for the DING, but it didn’t come. Sleep mode, she thought.

Thank God! Wait, is that allowed? Thank goodness?

“I don’t want those people in my head,” Alima said.

“Stop. Don’t say that.” A lump of fear formed in Eve’s throat. What if the Reformation Collective heard Alima say something like that? The repercussions could be terrible.

“It’s fine.” Alima waved away the warning. “I don’t hate them. I just don’t agree with them.” She held out a spoonful of pureed pumpkin to Sara, who turned her head away. “To be fair, it’s not all bad. You know how Mo’s been trying to get a job for ages? Well, he’s been getting a stack of interviews since employers have been using Viewers. I suppose it’s because the Refs call them out for their subconscious bias against his name.”

“So, why not get on board if it’s helping?”

“I can’t do it.”

“But why?” Eve just could not understand why someone as intelligent and progressive as Alima would be against it.

The baby grabbed the spoon from Alima’s hand and banged it against her high chair. Orange puree splattered across the front of Alima’s hoodie. She ignored the mess and turned to Eve. “Imagine I’m praying and suddenly I have those people in my head telling me I can’t believe there’s only one God because it’s not inclusive, and I have to believe that Christians are right, too, and Hindus and atheists.”

“But you’re quite… progressive, aren’t you?”

Alima laughed. “How can I pray to a God I’m supposed to believe both does and doesn’t exist?”

A gray cloud of confusion filled Eve’s mind. Praying wasn't wrong, she knew that, but believing you're right about "God," well, that was difficult to swallow. "Can you leave room for doubt?" Eve asked.

Alima paused and looked Eve in the eye. "So, I can't believe something with conviction?"

"Can't they all be true? Wouldn't that be nicer?" Eve felt her breath come easier. She'd found the answer. Nothing needed to be absolute.

Alima shook her head as she fetched a wet wipe and scrubbed the pumpkin off her top. "That's a lot of mental gymnastics. So, there's only one God, who's also three in one, who's also a million Gods, and also doesn't exist?"

The clarity Eve had a moment before disappeared and she dropped down onto a kitchen chair, feeling defeated.

"If I believed in multiple dimensions, I might be able to get there," Alima said. "But I don't want to. I'm happy with just one dimension and one God."

"Please don't take this the wrong way." Eve glanced down at the cat that was brushing itself against her leg. "But I think your faith is kind of clouding your judgment."

"Well, you know me, Eve. I love to debate, and I don't want everyone to think like me, but *I* want to think like me."

* * *

Eve walked down the hall, away from the apartment. Alima's words had unsettled her, and she just needed to get outside and breathe and let go of all the confusing debate. Getting a Viewer was right, and she wouldn't let Alima's religious beliefs hold her back from becoming a better person.

An icy breeze crept its way underneath the sliding doors, and Eve put her coat on when she felt it. The doors slid open.

Tendrils of frost turned into a bleak slap of wind, and two broad-shouldered men strode past her. They wore dark suits. The man on the right gave her a fleeting, blank-faced stare as he passed by.

Eve stopped and tapped her Viewer to revive it.

DING. DING. DING. DING.

"No," Eve muttered, and her hands started to shake. "You were supposed to be sleeping."

Behind her, three heavy bangs echoed from Alima's front door.

Vibrations pounded Eve's skull, demanding access. She tripped and caught herself against the wall. With a trembling finger, she touched the crescent to usher the voices back in.

"Zali here. Eve, this is not the kind of friend who fosters inclusive, sensitive thinking. Reconsider."

A man's deep voice thundered. "Ms. Bashir. It's come to our attention that there's been a serious violation—"

"Sabrina here. Eve, do you realize what your *friend* has done? She's a criminal. We've had to report her. I agree with Zali completely. Time to reconsider your friendship circle."

Alima opened the door, saw the men, and tried to close it again. One man slammed his shoulder against it and forced it open. "Regulation eighty explicitly prohibits hate directed at the Reformation Collective. Your use of derogatory language such as 'those people' has—"

Move Eve. Go. Move. Help Alima!

"Mylo here. Eve, Eve, Eve. How did you get yourself tangled up with someone like that? Definitely need to change things up. But, on a positive note, first day in the community and already contributing to the cause. Well done! You know, you could qualify for your own channel at this rate."

The men seized Alima's wrists. "As you refuse to adopt the technology that could help you change, we've got a warrant to detain you for compulsory reeducation."

Hunched and frozen against the wall, Eve could see Alima thrashing, trying to break their grip. "Sara," Alima screamed.

When the men dragged Alima down the hallway, she locked eyes with Eve.

No. No. No. What the hell?

Eve's breath was ragged, chest thumping.

DING.

"Eve, we have some feedback for you."

* * *

Discussion Questions

1. What (*if anything*) is the difference between being fired from a job in the story for using racial slurs and getting fired from a job today for using repeated racial slurs?
2. Does it matter what you think, or only what you say out loud? Is it okay to think misogynistic thoughts so long as you don't say misogynistic things?
3. To what degree do you believe changing thoughts changes behavior? What (*if anything*) is wrong with using a tool that helps you change your thoughts?
4. Jobs may currently require you to have a certain degree, citizenship, a background check, be vaccinated, or even be a nonsmoker. How is this different than a job requiring you to have a Viewer? Does your opinion change if the job is private or public?
5. Is being accepting of diverse opinions (*like being accepting of people of another faith or another lifestyle*) simply being accepting that other people are allowed to be wrong? Or is it more complicated than that?

* * *

Reality Services

W.K. Ryan

* * *

Content Disclosure: Mild Language; Supernatural Themes

* * *

Chapter 1: The Duality of Ma'am, Sir!

Cindy leans forward toward her desk and presses the enter key on her keyboard.

"Reality Services, Cindy speaking."

"Hi, uh, I'd like to know if God really exists."

"I'm sorry, sir, we're going to need some personal information first. Please give me your name, birthdate, and social security number."

"Oh, okay. My name is Thomas—PERSONAL INFORMATION REDACTED."

"Okay, there we go, Thomas," Cindy says.

"Please, call me Tom."

"Okay, Tom. Now, what was your question?"

"Does God really exist?"

"Which God would that be?"

"Isn't my religion in my file?"

"Ah, okay, yes, I see it. The answer to your question, then, is yes and no."

"..."

"Oh, I'm sorry Tom. I'm a bit tired, and when I get a bit tired, I get a bit dyslexic. I meant to say, 'no and yes.'"

"I don't understand. Is this a joke?" Tom says.

"Have I not answered your question satisfactorily?"

Cindy quickly hangs up before Tom can answer. The small LED light above her computer turns a deep red. She tries her best to ignore it.

* * *

Chapter 2: I Can't Hear the Difference

Cindy leans forward toward her desk and presses the enter key on her keyboard.

"Reality Services, Cindy speaking."

"Hi, my name is Marcus. I work in the live audio field and for years I've always had what people call impostor syndrome. I'm calling to ask if I'm good enough at my job. I just, I guess I feel like I'm not good enough at it and I always worry that, well, I worry that I'm just fooling everybody. The mixing board looks pretty complicated, and I don't feel like anybody really knows what I'm doing when I'm mixing audio. I'm rambling; am I making sense here?"

"Yes, you are, Marcus, but before I can help you, I'm going to need some information. Let's start with your full name, birthday, and social security number."

"Sure. My full name is—PERSONAL INFORMATION REDACTED."

"Okay, Marcus, just a moment." Cindy's keyboard goes *click clack click*. "Yes, there we go," she says. "So, apparently Marcus, everyone at your job respects you and most of them think of you as quite smart and capable, but as you alluded to, none of them really have much of an audio background, and if someone with a true audio background were to witness you at work, they'd see through you quite quickly."

Marcus lets out a sigh. "Yep, I knew it."

"Yeah, I mean, let's face it, when you're adjusting the compression on a snare head, you really can't hear the difference between 2:1 and 4:1 compression ratios, can you?"

"I just try to make it look like I have strong opinions while I'm doing it; you're completely correct, ma'am."

"That's what we're here for, Marcus. Have I answered your questions satisfactorily?"

"Yes." Marcus's voice is now barely a whisper.

The light above Cindy's computer flashes green.

"I'd sure appreciate it if you could stay on the line and complete a brief survey," Cindy says.

* * *

Chapter 3: Real Love

Cindy uses her mouse to drag the Jack of Spades onto the Ten of Spades. The ringing phone causes her to flinch, and she quickly minimizes the program, hits the enter key on her computer, and adjusts her headset microphone.

"Reality Services, Cindy speaking," she says.

"Hi, Cindy, my name is Jada. I don't really know how to start this."

"Well, Jada, why don't you start by giving me your full name, birthdate, and social security number?"

"Oh, okay. My full name is—PERSONAL

INFORMATION REDACTED."

"Thank you, Jada. We're all set. Now, what can I help you with?"

"This is going to sound crazy, but I'm calling to ask if my girlfriend, Tess, is real."

"Is real?"

"Yeah, I don't know; I probably shouldn't have called. I'm sorry."

"Nothing to be sorry about, Jada. That's what we're here for. Please hold on a moment."

Cindy's fingers dance across the keys. "Hmm," she says. "I find it's best to walk people through these sorts of things rather than just give you an answer outright. That okay with you, Jada?"

"Sure."

"Is Tess there with you now?"

"Yeah, she's here."

"Is she upset you decided to call me this morning?"

"You could say that. *What, am I lying? Is this you happy?*"

"Excuse me."

"Sorry, I was talking to her not you."

"That's quite all right. If it doesn't make you too uncomfortable, could you ask Tess to leave the room a moment?"

"Okay, okay. Hold on a second."

"Sure thing," Cindy says.

Cindy picks at a piece of skin that has peeled off the cuticle on her pointer finger, left hand. She should use a nail clipper for this. It always hurts so bad if you just peel it off. Still, it's tempting.

"Okay, she's gone," Jada says. "What do you need me to do?”

“When did you meet Tess, Jada? How did you meet her?”

“Oh, we go way back.” A moment passes. “Oh my God, I can’t remember how we met. That’s not good, is it?”

“Well, let’s just take this step by step. Does Tess live with you?”

“Yeah.”

“How many bathrooms do you have in your apartment?”

“How do you know I live in an apartment?”

“It’s in your file.”

“Oh, yeah, okay. Just the one bathroom, why?”

“Can you go there now? You’re on your cell phone, right?”

“Yeah, I’m on my cell. I’ll go to the bathroom.” Jada laughs. “I mean, you know what I mean.”

Cindy peels back the skin on her finger, right to the point where it stings a bit, and then she stops herself.

“Okay, I’m in the bathroom. What do I do now?”

“Open up your medicine cabinet.”

“Done.”

“If Tess lives with you, she should have her own makeup. Do you see any of her makeup in your medicine cabinet?”

“She’s yelling at me. *Okay, calm down! I hear you!*”

“I thought you asked her to leave?”

“I did, but she’s back, okay?”

“What’s Tess saying, Jada?”

“She’s saying that we share our makeup, which we do, and she says she has some of her own makeup in her purse.”

“Toothbrush?” Cindy says.

“Girl, you better not be using my toothbrush!” Jada says.

“Talk to me Jada, talk to me.”

“Okay, I’m sorry, Miss.”

“Am I on speaker?”

“Yes.”

“I want you to find some pictures on your phone of you and Tess.”

“Tess doesn’t like pictures.”

“Do you share the same clothes, Jada?”

A moment passes.

“Oh my God. Oh my God!” Jada says.

“Yes, Jada. I’m sorry. Your girlfriend doesn’t exist.”

Cindy pulls the skin back on her cuticle in one fast motion. It stings more than she thought it would.

The light above her phone turns green.

* * *

Chapter 4: Do Any of These Three Men Play the Fiddle?

Having taken the last bite of her pimento cheese sandwich, Cindy snaps the red lid back onto her Tupperware. She had splurged and gone with the good Italian bread the last time she went shopping, and boy, was it worth it. She is brushing off the last of the crumbs from her gray dress pants when the phone rings.

She sucks at her front teeth for a moment before hitting the enter key on her keyboard.

“Reality Services, Cindy speaking,” she says.

A robotic voice answers, “This is a call from Angora Hospital, a mental health facility. One of our patients—*Dean*—would like to speak with you. Would you like to accept this call from—*Dean*? If so, please say ‘*yes*’ clearly into the receiver.”

“Yes.”

“Thank you. Please hold a moment,” the robotic voice says; this is followed by a three-note chime.

"Hello, Dean, this is Cindy from Reality Services. I was told to expect your call. I'm happy to hear from you. Are you there, Dean?"

"Hello."

"Yes, I'm here. My name is Cindy. How are you?"

"How did you know I was going to call? Who told you?"

"Who do you think?"

"Was it REDACTED?"

"That is correct, Dean. It was REDACTED. Now, how may I help you?"

"They said you can be trusted with sensitive information."

"That is correct."

"I am in a very, very dangerous situation, and I need answers."

"That's what I'm here for, Dean."

"Are you familiar with Satan?"

"I don't know him personally, but I am aware of who he is."

Cindy looks at the light above her computer, no change.

"Are you?"

"Yes."

"That's good. That's real good. Is anyone else listening right now?"

All calls are monitored.

"I'm listening, Dean."

"Yeah, but is anybody else listening?"

At a loss, Cindy says, "All calls are monitored."

"By who?"

"By the people who monitor all the calls."

Cindy glances back up at the light above her computer; still no change.

"Fine. Listen closely, all of you. There are three other patients here at Angora; their names are Alejandro, Yuki, and Steve. I don't know their last names. They may not have last names."

"Alejandro, Yuki, and Steve. Got it. Do you have a question about these individuals, Dean?"

"All three of them claim to be the devil, but all three claim that they, and only they, are the one and only true devil. But the devil is crafty. I need to know which one of them is the true devil."

"What if none of them are the true devil?"

"You looked it up already?"

"No, I haven't looked it up yet. I'm just saying, isn't there a chance none of them are the actual devil?"

"How do I know I can trust your information?"

"We are Reality Services. Our word is law."

"One hundred percent?"

"Yes."

"Okay then."

"One moment, Dean."

Cindy is one of those people whose fingers hit the keys with a musical quality no matter what she's typing away at. Dean rocks himself back and forth to the sound of the buttons being pressed and released.

"Wow."

"What is it?" Dean asks.

"It's just—I've never encountered anything like this before.”

“What?”

“I don’t know how to say this, Dean, but it turns out that Steve is the literal devil, the one from ancient times. You were right, Dean!”

“…”

Cindy looks up. The light above Cindy’s computer turns red.

“I’m sorry, that was inappropriate of me,” Cindy says. “I was just kidding with you, Dean. None of the three you asked about are actually the devil. Alejandro, Yuki, and Steve are all just patients like you. I shouldn’t have joked about your question. I apologize. There’s no excuse for it. I don’t know what’s gotten into me.”

“That can’t be right.”

“It is. Again, my apologies, but this is good news, isn’t it? You’re safe.”

Dean lets out a guttural scream that almost knocks Cindy off her office chair. She can make out other voices on the line, and it seems like a struggle is taking place. Things sound like they’re breaking; she can hear sneakers squeaking on waxed floors. Eventually, it sounds like someone picks up the line.

“Is everything all right?” Cindy says.

The line disconnects.

The office wall to Cindy’s right turns a deep red.

* * *

Chapter 5: The Logos and The Rhema

Cindy’s office is about the size of a large closet. She sits with her chair facing away from her computer. Good posture, back straight, hands clasped and resting on her lap. You wouldn’t know she was terrified unless you looked closely at her eyes.

The walls in her office are a beige color except for that one accent wall that is now a deep shade of red. This is where her attention is focused as the clock on her computer changes from 03:29 to 03:30 p.m.

Then, like someone turned on a slide projector in her office, figures begin gliding six inches from the floor and in single file through the red accent wall and across her office, exiting the beige wall across from where they entered. These figures appear almost two-dimensional. They are, in fact, all the same image; at least they appear to be: a Black man in his early forties, slim but athletic build, meticulously dressed in a charcoal suit with forest green accents.

Cindy holds her posture, trying not to focus on any one of these identical figures. For their part, the Black men do not give any indication that they are aware of Cindy's presence. They just pass silently through the room. This goes on for around forty seconds. Whether forty seconds is a brief amount of time or an excruciatingly long amount of time is a relativistic observation; in this case, it is a very, very long time.

Eventually, one of the figures turns and leaves the procession. That figure floats to the chair across from Cindy and sits. As he unbuttons the top button of his suit jacket and smooths his tie, he seems to solidify into the space of Cindy's office, becoming an object of solid matter like Cindy's leg, which is now vibrating in such a way that her left heel rhythmically hits the floor in unintentional sixteenth notes.

The other figures, still gliding, fade out of existence until it's just Cindy and the man alone.

"I am here to observe the upcoming phone call with your supervisor," the man says. His voice is deep and professional; it carries the weight of authority.

Before Cindy can acknowledge what the man has said, her phone rings. She turns awkwardly toward her computer and hits the enter key without breaking eye contact with the man sitting across from her.

"Reality Services," says the man on the other end of the phone. His voice is the same as the man seated across from her. "I trust the monitor is present?"

"Yes," Cindy says. She tries not to make eye contact. "The monitor is present."

"Excellent. How are you, Cindy?" the man on the phone says.

Cindy takes a deep breath. "Good," she says.

"I am glad to hear it. Let us get to the matter at hand. We've noticed that you have been obfuscating your responses to various clients and downright joking and mocking others. We acknowledge that the deaths of Alejandro, Yuki, and Steve occurred prior to your interaction with the client, *our* interaction with the client, as you represent us. However, that does not mean your response to his question was at all appropriate."

"Dean killed them? He killed them before he called?"

"Yes."

"I didn't see that in the file."

"Am I interviewing you, or are you interviewing me, Cindy?"

The man sitting across from Cindy nods his head to this assertion, though it is not apparent that he can hear what is being said on the other end of the phone call.

"This is becoming a pattern. A man asks you if God is real and you say, 'Yes and no,' 'No and yes?' Explain to me, how is this a yes-and-no question?"

Cindy wipes her eyes with her thumb and pointer finger.

"I didn't want to answer him."

"It's your job to answer him."

"Are you aware of Case J1135?" Cindy says.

* * *

Chapter 6: Case J1135

Cindy stretches her arm over her head and lets out a loud yawn. Her phone rings. She hits the enter key on her computer and says, "Reality Services, Cindy speaking."

"Yes, hi. I am calling on behalf of my daughter Sophia. I was told I need to give you some personal information before I can put her on the phone?"

"Yes, that's true. Are you Sophia's guardian?"

"I am her mother." The woman lets out a sob. "I'm sorry. I'm a bit emotional."

"No need to apologize, ma'am. I'm going to need your name, your daughter's full name, both of your birthdates, and, finally, both of your social security numbers."

"Absolutely, my name is—PERSONAL INFORMATION REDACTED."

"Very good, ma'am. Now I must ask that you say yes or no to the following: I hereby give permission to Reality Services to speak with one of our agents with the full knowledge that my daughter Sophia will be told the truth in regard to her question or questions."

"Yes."

"Do you know what she is going to ask?" Cindy says.

"No, she won't tell us. I'm not comfortable with this, but—" She sobs once more. "I'm sorry, I'd just rather not talk about it."

"I understand. Is she there?"

"Yes. Sophia, this is Cindy. She will answer your questions, just like I promised."

"Hello?" Sophia's voice is weak. She is unsure of herself.

"I understand you're seven years old. Is that right, Sophia?"

"Yes, seven and three months," she says. "I'd like to ask my question now?"

"Okay, dear."

"I am very sick; my belly hurts and I'm going to die soon."

Cindy covers her mouth with her hands. Her computer screen says "leukemia."

"My mommy and daddy and nana and pop-pop all say that I'll go to sleep and not wake up and it will be like a wonderful dream, and they'll all be there waiting for me in heaven. Is that true?"

Cindy doesn't answer.

"Hello? Is that true? You're supposed to tell me the truth."

Cindy's voice shakes. "What do you think, Sophia dear?"

"That doesn't matter. You're supposed to tell me. You're scaring me because you're not answering."

"It's not true," Cindy says.

Sophia shatters. Her cries are like the impact of a bullet on glass. She falls into her mother's arms.

Cindy stays on the line and listens.

* * *

Chapter 7: No and Yes

Cindy looks up at the man sitting across from her. His legs are crossed. He adjusts his glasses with his ring finger, pushing them closer to his face.

The voice on the phone says, “That call was unfortunate, but you handled it professionally.”

“I destroyed the last ember of hope in a dying child.”

“Everything we stand for would be worthless if we didn’t tell our clients the truth.”

“Clients? She’s a little girl.”

“She’s both, and this is semantics.”

“This job has taught me that the truth is hardly ever good news. If I’m not talking to mental patients, then what I say is turning regular people into mental patients. Every single day, I destroy people. It’s just, it’s just gotten to be too much for me.”

“Are you quitting then?”

“I feel powerless.”

“Is this your resignation?”

“You’ve already decided whether you’re going to let me go or not. *You know everything*.”

“So, explain your jokes.”

“That’s exactly how to ruin a good joke.”

“Who says it was a good joke? Look over at the monitor. Is he laughing?”

The monitor seated across from Cindy shakes his head in disapproval.

“That’s the one thing you don’t get to decide,” Cindy says. “I thought it was funny. If I found out a meteor was hurtling toward the Earth and no one could stop it, the only thing I could really do is laugh.”

“I’m going to fire you, Cindy. Is that funny?”

Something in the arrogance of the man on the phone, the self-seriousness of the monitor sitting across from her… This whole situation is completely designed to belittle and intimidate her, and yet in this moment, it occurs to her just how highly inappropriate it would be to just laugh right now. To laugh right in their faces. Would they become violent? She'd heard stories. Whatever happens, she just can't laugh.

The monitor across from her cocks his head to the side, and somehow, she feels her lower lip quivering. "What is wrong with your lip?" he says in a very serious manner that is not at all funny.

"What is wrong with your lip?" says the voice on the phone in a completely unfunny and intimidating way that shows in no uncertain terms that Cindy would have to travel many days and many nights to find a room in this world, or the next, where any kind of levity was welcome.

What does it, is when the man on the phone says, "You were hired to be a Reality Services employee not a nightclub comedian."

A yelp shoots out of her like a cannonball. She covers her mouth with both hands in shock. The monitor is also in complete shock, and looking at him, at his self-seriousness, she laughs so hard that spit hits him in the face.

The monitor immediately takes off his glasses to clean them. As he's doing so, he says, "Oh please. This is highly inappropriate. You've gotten your spit all over my glasses."

This sends Cindy into a coughing fit. She loudly passes gas, and it gets even worse. Her face is now the color of the deep red wall. If she could breathe or speak, she would ask the man across from her to please stop looking at her with such disgust.

It is just so damn funny.

It just feels so damn good.

It takes more than forty seconds for her to be able to take a moment and stop laughing before she breaks into another laughing fit. Then she laughs again. The monitor and the supervisor just wait it out. Time flies by for Cindy.

Finally, as Cindy tries to catch her breath, the phone hangs up. The monitor stands and removes Cindy's headphones.

"You're fired," he says.

Cindy waits for something awful to happen to her. It does not.

The monitor pushes his glasses back into place with his middle finger. He straightens his suit jacket and buttons the top button. His doppelgangers begin floating across the room again. The monitor shuts down her computer, the red light above it shuts off as well.

"Security will see you out," he says and then his feet lift off the ground, and he becomes two-dimensional as he joins the procession of REDACTED. Soon they all fade out of Cindy's perception and the office's accent wall changes back from red to beige.

Cindy feels terrible that she's lost her job. She doesn't know what she's going to do.

Cindy feels elated that she's lost her job. She doesn't know what she's going to do.

If you enjoyed this story, please stay on the line for a brief survey.

* * *

Discussion Questions

1. Which of the phone callers did you find the most compelling? Why do you think that particular caller resonated with you?
2. If you were able to call Reality Services, what is the first question you would ask and why?
3. Do you think the calls to Reality Services tend to repeat, or are all unique to the person's situation? If they repeat, why do you think that is and what does that say about the human condition? If they are mostly unique, what do they say about the caller?
4. Cindy says, "The truth is hardly ever good news." Do you agree and, if so, why is that?
5. For Sophia's call regarding the afterlife, would you have told her the truth or lied? At what age should you no longer lie about the truth to children?

* * *

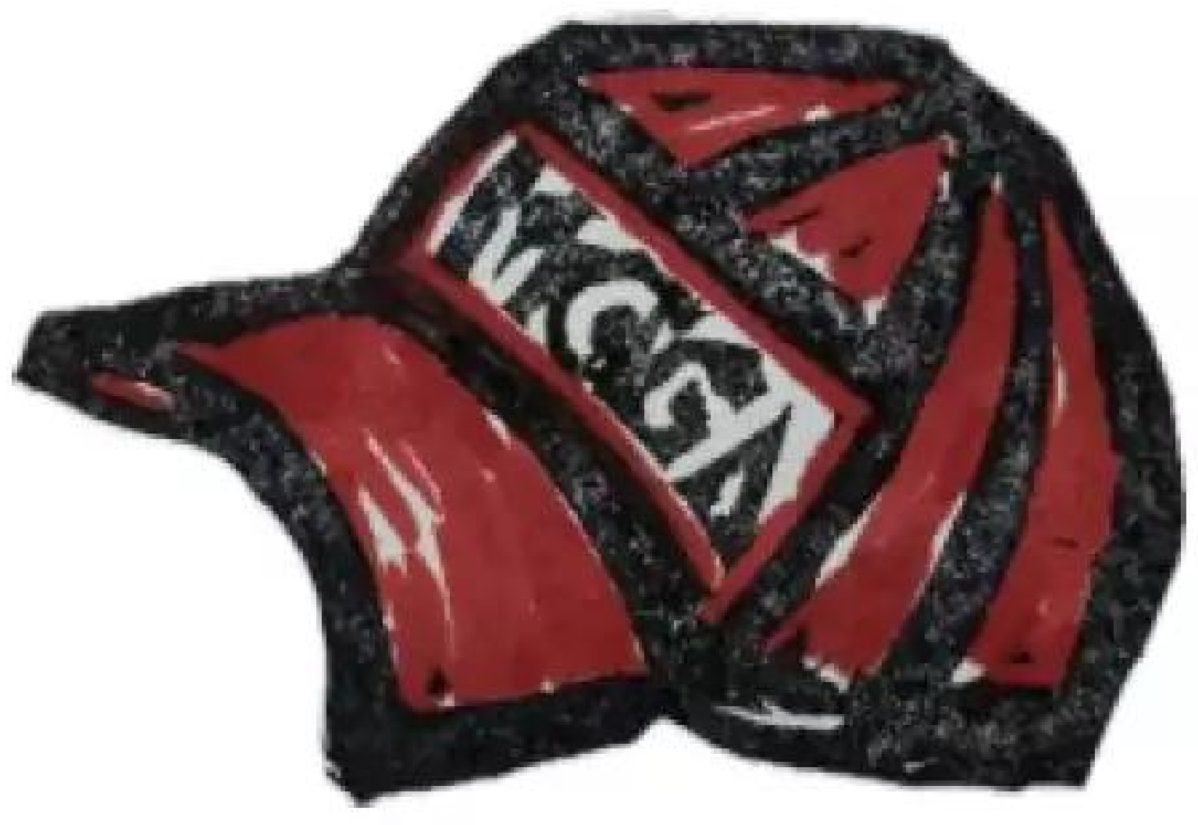
Signed Out

Nina Barufaldi

* * *

Content Disclosure: Strong Language

* * *



I turned my dad's red MAGA hat into an MGGA hat with a white paint pen and then drew the words on a cardboard sign: *Make Gaza Great Again.* I knew I'd finally have the sign that was a hit, the Belle of the Bridge, and Janelle would stop riding me about having "wishy-washy politics" or suggesting that I should "get my own group." This was my three hundred and twenty-fourth Saturday protesting on the wooden Eliot bridge between my island and the mainland, and Janelle was finally going to see I wasn't wishy-washy. I had an opinion, and they'd all see how I'd undermined the whole narrative of the MAGA premise. Flipped the script.

I told my dad about my plan on the phone last week, and he asked me if I was okay. “Three hundred and twenty-four, kiddo?! You can do something else, you know. Take a baking or quilting class on the mainland,” he said.

I said, “It’s not 1950, Dad. And you know the world is falling apart, right?—women’s rights, racial justice, climate change—it’s not a joke and, also, I don’t have any other friends.”

Back during #METOO, when we first started on the bridge, I wore my wool pussy hat proudly—I’d had enough #MeToo moments to last a lifetime, and I wasn’t going to be silent anymore. No joke. And then #BLM hit, and my brother is Black, so I had a lot to say about that; and the Trans March too because of my mother’s brother. That sign was amazing. I wrote, *RESIST THE CIS-TEM*. I got all the fist bumps when I brought that one out. I bring some real energy to the group.

When we run out of things to protest or need a break from the big ones, we go back to our *No Microplastics in the Ocean* protest. Sometimes it feels hollow bouncing back to that... like when we raged against land mines or freeing Tibet. What can eleven regulars and four fair-weather protesters, who meet for an hour per week, really do for the ocean or Tibet? We don’t raise money; we just jump up and down on a bridge and wave to all the people on their way to the grocery store. One day, I asked Janelle if we could pick up roadside trash or do community service projects when we ran out of conviction for a cause. I suggested we make a physical difference, but she turned it into a capital offense.

“Who is running out of conviction, Meghan? I’m not. Are you, Jay? Are you, Virginia? Are you, Charles?” That’s what

Janelle said. And clearly, nobody else had run out of conviction. "I guess you have it or you don't," she confirmed.

Then Virginia asked me whether my Patagonia fleece was purchased new or secondhand. I said I got it secondhand. But I was lying, and they all knew it because they shook their heads in unison and gave me that superior woolen look. Message received loud and clear: "Janelle's the protest boss."

I wasn't sure what made Janelle the boss other than she had the most money and was a retired lawyer who bossed everyone around and made me cry most Sundays sitting next to my woodstove. She gives me that feeling like I'm not enough, or I am an imposter. The next week, I struggled to protest passionately for an hour about PFAS because they're forever, and I'm not, but I pretended. Then we all drove back, our motorcade of eleven electric cars, to Janelle's house on the water for the usual late lunch soiree, with beer that makes me feel happier for a minute and sad hours later when I've got nothing to do besides talk to pine trees or chickadees about how none of the people in the group even ask me how I'm doing.

That week I told Dad, "We don't carpool, or pick up trash on the beach, or even write letters to politicians."

Dad doesn't think much of Janelle; he calls her a despot. They went to high school together. Anyway, we were all sitting in her living room again, and I thought Jay kinda, finally, made eyes at me, which might be ninety-nine percent of the reason I keep showing up. I thought maybe it was happening. Maybe he was into me, despite that faux pas of assuming he was African American.

"Jamaican," he corrected.

Dammit, I knew better too. He started during #BLM, and it felt more authentic to have him on the bridge with us, like when my brother came. I told Jay how, before he came, it was weird: White people holding up Black Lives Matter signs for other White people to see. Jay hesitated and kind of looked around. “Isn’t that who needs to know?”

I wanted to talk about how exclusive monoculture can be, and he said, “We need to be careful to not tokenize the diversity we have.”

“But you’re the only person of color here unless my brother happens to show up again—”

“How often does he come?”

“Just the once.”

That made him laugh. Was he laughing at me? I wasn’t sure, but after that, we chatted off and on while we bounced our different signs at the cars rumbling over the wooden trestles. He coached soccer at the high school off-island and knew some of the middle schoolers I teach. We have a lot of conversations like, “Wait, you know Scout? I know Scout.” But truly, everyone knows everyone, because there are only nine hundred and seventy-nine year-round residents on this tiny island, and most of them are over sixty. Eight of them are close to my age, and I’m pretty sure four of them deal drugs.

Anyway, per our weekly tradition, we had our late lunch at Janelle’s, and there was more of that small talk from the older folks about who drove by and waved, and who drove by but didn’t wave. I thought mostly about Jay’s eyes when he talked to me—a beautiful deep-space black I wanted to swim in.

“Did you remember the bread?” Janelle asked while I was in that deep space.

I squinted at her, pulled four loaves of homemade sourdough out of my tote, and placed them next to Charles's Crockpot of minestrone on the sideboard. Janelle took her usual place by the piano, where she pronounced the protest for the following week. She hit the high C five times to get everyone's attention, even though she already had it. "It's Gaza," she declared and looked at me like she was issuing a challenge. "Next week, we protest the atrocities in Gaza."

She said it because when things first got hot in Gaza, I was uncomfortable being out on the bridge saying that Israel was wrong. You know why. I talked to my dad about it, and he asked, "Have you talked to any Palestinians or Israelis about it?"

But I don't know any here, because Maine is so White. That week on the bridge I showed up without a sign; I didn't know what to write, but I wanted to be with my friends, okay, Jay, who was supporting Palestine.

On the phone again, Dad said, "War is terrible, kiddo. It's not always clear who is right and who is wrong."

"I just wish we could get the bad guys and be done with it." I sounded like such a child. Why did I say *we*? Like I'm on the good guy's side? What side are the good guys even on? I wanted to bring this up in our group, and I also wanted to ask about the news article I'd read in *The Wall Street Journal* about how most car emissions come from tires and that electric cars are so heavy they produce more emissions than regular gas cars. Could that be true? I felt like Jay would have something smart to say about this if Janelle would just shut her trap for once, but I chickened out.

But this February afternoon was warm on the bridge; the early spring sunshine must have boosted our vitamin D levels, and I felt good about my red hat and how I had read loads of news and finally understood the conflict and how I really felt about it. The after-beers were working their magic on everyone, and the vibe back at Janelle's was similar to the kids just before recess. Janelle was explaining why the US should be supporting Ukraine and not Israel. Charles wanted more aid for Palestine. Jay reminded everyone that it was Black History Month. Virginia said, "Hello, can I get a little help defending my uterus?"

I gave Jay a wink from under the visor of my MGGA hat, and then he stared at me for an eternity with those long eyelashes, unblinking. The look electrified me, and I just blurted it out—the bit about the electric cars. It was the first time I'd said anything in the group since my community service idea got rejected.

Before I even finished, Janelle stood up from the piano stool and put out her hand like a stop sign. She said, "Are you seriously questioning EVs? You do know the whole world is burning because of the gasoline engine, right, Meghan?"

"No, it's just—I read an article saying that the weight of the batteries causes the rubber of the tires to heat up and produce more emissions than..."

"I can't even talk to you with that hat on. That's your father's, isn't it?" She was standing sock footed on her heated floor. "In the last hour, I've received twelve Facebook messages asking me why I allowed a MAGA hatter to protest with us, and one was the governor's son. It's horrifying."

Slapped. I shook my head, the red bill moving left and right.

"I co-opted the message. It's FOR Gaza. *Make GAZA Great Again*!" I emphasized the *G*'s again and looked around. "You can see that. I know you can." I pointed to my forehead, then took the hat off and put it inches from her face. Obviously, she couldn't see it. "MGGA. It's repurposed!"

She swiped it away and said, "And when, exactly, was Gaza great, Meghan?" Then, raising both of her cashmere-sweatered arms to the group, "If you want to undermine our group with your red hat racism and misogyny, you can do it from the other side of the bridge."

"What? I'm not a... You guys!?" I looked at everyone, and they just stared back with the same sour face Janelle wore.

"Why are you all looking at me like that? I've been here with you for the last six years of my life, teaching your grandchildren." I panicked and yelled, "Is anyone going to explain to Janelle that we don't do anything besides jump up and down on a bridge and then get together after and talk about how great we are?"

I wanted someone, anyone, to challenge Janelle. Jay. I needed Jay to tell her. For him to explain that I wasn't the person she was accusing me of being. For him to tell her that I am the type of person who can handle a real conversation.

Virginia, still in her tartan wool, leaned over on the Queen Anne sofa and said to Charles, loud enough for everyone to hear, "It just looks like a MAGA hat."

"I know, I know," whispered Charles and he patted her knee.

Jay shook his head and all eyes turned to him. He looked like he was deep in thought. I thought he was going to tell Janelle to stuff it as he walked past the granite countertops toward the door. He held it open and looked at me with those eyes and said, "You should go. You're making us uncomfortable again."

"Again!? Oh my fucking word!" How could he do this? I grabbed my tote and my four loaves of sourdough. "I'm not breaking bread with you assholes."

Janelle joined him by the door, and I watched as he put his arm around her shoulders in solidarity. "Yes, Meghan. Again."

"You people!" I screamed. "You people are what's wrong with this world," I screamed as I walked toward my Prius. "It's not enough to yell it from a bridge in the middle of nowhere, you have to do it too. You have to build the fucking bridge! Build the bridge! Build the bridge!"

I went home and cried again and again while I spread chunks of my bread under the pine boughs. The chickadees came and feasted. They paid no attention to me or my hat.

* * *

Discussion Questions

1. Does it matter that Meghan, and perhaps others, see the protest group as a social group that also protests? Does the social aspect of protesting affect the “good-human points” you get for protesting in the first place?
2. Clearly there are interpersonal politics within the protest group. Is that inevitable? Do all human groups have good and bad guys, leaders and outcasts regardless of the reason they come together?
3. Does it matter that the group protests issues for which they seem to have no direct association? Is it necessary to have gone to Tibet before you can protest for its freedom?
4. Does it matter that the protest group gets all of its information from third-party sources? For example, everything they know about the Isreal/Palestine war is filtered through reports and, potentially, biased reporting.
5. Meghan argues they should protest less and do more service, like pick up trash. Do you agree? What percentage of their time should be protesting versus doing? What is the reasoning for your opinion?

* * *

Sisters of Mercy

Brooke Clark

* * *

Content Disclosure: Sexual Situations

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Final Monitoring Committee Report on Reactionary Fiction "Sisters of Mercy" by [Subject name redacted; ref file ArtCult/subWr 300391 UPDATED: SEE NOW ref file Men./subHC 571324889]

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of literature in a well-ordered society is to train the minds of the young in the values approved by the State. However, the existing "literary canon," having been created almost exclusively by straight white men, is unacceptable to a diverse contemporary society as it constantly reiterates and reinscribes ideas and values that are harmful to marginalized communities.

Through a partnership with the Chinese conglomerate YaWeiCorp, the State first attempted to replace canonical fiction and poetry with AI-generated didactic works aimed at reeducating children. This failed: even under extreme coercion, children refused to read or listen to these State-approved texts.

The current program, of which this Report forms a part, is an attempt to reeducate and rehabilitate previously published writers, most of whom worked as teachers of creative writing in the old universities and colleges (since decommissioned, of course). Given budget constraints, and as these writers are being held in detention at State expense anyway, it's appropriate to see if they can be induced to write new literary works that advance approved narratives and stimulate correct thought in the youth.

As part of this ongoing project, excerpts follow from the short story "Sisters of Mercy," written by one of these authors (hereinafter the "Subject") along with the relevant Committee commentary.

EXCERPTS

Sisters of Mercy

Sometimes in the afternoons, when they both had a spare, they would ride the bus to her house for sex. Her mother was at work, her father absent as the result of some shrouded, obscure circumstance that she would never fully explain. He developed the strange notion that he had left her mother for another man.

Lianne was always on top; he would lie on the floor with his head resting against her saddle, she would settle gently down on him and then take things at her own pace. She carried on a fragmentary conversation throughout: "Did you see those boots Marianne was wearing? I wonder where she got them… I need to talk to Mr. Drabik about whether I can write the physics test later in the week… I have a riding meet that day… He's nice I'm sure he'll let me… Tina is totally not going out with Jason, but she has a crush on him… so does Wren… actually so do I maybe…"

It started more or less by accident; she had forgotten some book that she needed at home, they both had a spare after lunch, she asked if he wanted to ride back with her while she picked it up. It was a rundown rowhouse in a liminal neighborhood: heaps of litter swirled into corners by the wind, loiterers casting sullen glances over their shoulders, collapsing metal lawn chairs on front porches next to old coffee cans filled with dirt and cigarette butts—he took these details in almost unconsciously, as if adding up a column of figures that led to an unavoidable result. He realized he had never taken the bus north from the school before; he lived to the south, in a leafy upper-middle-class suburb. He hadn't thought about much of anything on the bus ride, but as soon as they stepped through the door the dead, still hush of the house told him no one else was there, and perhaps wouldn't be for some time, and then his mind lurched into motion. Should he do… something?

"Where's your… mom?" he asked, throat suddenly dry.

"Work. I think that book's in my room. Come on." He followed dumbly. The house was shabby, the cheap furniture looked exhausted, as if it would like nothing better than to crumble into dust and lie on the floor in a heap. Her bedroom was different, a jeweled box at the back of a cave: David Bowie posters on the wall (she had attended the Glass Spider tour, thought Tin Machine was awesome), bed made to military crispness, and on the floor, near the bookcase, a brown leather saddle. He knew she rode horses but hadn't expected this visible proof of it. The saddle drew him somehow, and as she crouched at the bookcase shuffling through the spines in search of—

whatever book—did she ever find it?—he stared down at the glossy leather. It seemed by far the most expensive item in the house, as if all the grim penny-pinching around it had been performed to afford this one resplendent object.

Then Lianne stood up—did she have a book in her hand?—and she was suddenly very close to him, he felt the warm stir of her breath across his throat. He had read in some drugstore magazine that women didn't like men who asked, they liked men who took the initiative and acted.

"What would happen," he asked, "if I kissed you right now?"

She looked up at him, round brown eyes with the slightest hint of hazel. "Try it and see."

So he did.

She managed things from there, and soon he was on his back with the saddle under his head, discomfort blotted out by the sight of her naked above him. How long had he loved her? It was hard to say; one day in September, in their Writer's Craft class, she had bent over to pick something up—a sheet of paper? A pen? Why couldn't he remember?—and her shirt—a black collared button-down—had gaped open, and he had seen the skin of her chest, such a pale white it looked almost blue, and a lacy black bra holding in her breasts, and felt himself falling into some vast echoing space.

And in October, when they had been in charge of the same group of grade nines at leadership camp, she developed the habit of coming up beside him when they were walking somewhere and hooking her arm through his as if they were an old married couple, smiling up at him with a flash in her eye as if she knew something of how he felt, but he couldn't tell if she was encouraging or mocking him. At these moments, he would think of the Leonard Cohen song “The Sisters of Mercy”—he was listening to a lot of Leonard Cohen then—and it seemed to contain all the longing he felt, and all the boundless, morose hopelessness as well. “We weren’t lovers like that…”

“Was that your first time?” she asked afterward.

“Yes.”

She settled her head on his shoulder—he felt the saddle against the back of his neck, her breasts compressed against him—and patted him on the chest. “You’ll be ready again soon. Try to hold out a little longer this time, okay?”

“Sure.”

Only later did he ask about David. He was in theater, two years older than Lianne, and attending a university in the northern extremes of the city. She was uncertain how faithful he was, but said they ought to be discreet; they both had a couple of classes with David’s younger sister. Overall, though, he found her remarkably blasé.

“This—us—can just be an occasional thing,” she said.

MONITORING COMMITTEE NOTES

As in previous attempts, Subject again begins his story with a sex scene that is essentially male wish fulfillment fantasy. Despite repeated Reeducation sessions, he has failed to internalize the Guidelines for the Creation of Appropriate Literature (hereinafter the “Guidelines”) and falls back into old habits.

Notably, Subject has switched, in this attempt, to writing in the third person, apparently in an attempt to disguise the identification of the author with the male main character. The ruse is transparent, however; as the story goes on, we note the strain, we hear the "I" that every "he" attempts to obscure.

Note the class prejudice, uncritically passed on, in the description of the neighborhood and the association of pale skin with beauty, which reinscribes societal white supremacy.

The references to suppressed artists like David Bowie and Leonard Cohen—whom Subject quotes from memory, as he has no access to any written material except the Guidelines and other State-published documents supporting official ideology—suggests a familiarity with reactionary works that is especially problematic.

* * *

He was standing by Lianne's locker one morning when she came up, spun her combination, and opened it.

"Hey."

"I need to go see Mr. Drabik about writing that test later in the week." She pulled off her enormous, baggy blue sweatshirt; under it, she was wearing a tiny white—something, he had no idea what it was called—a halter top?—so tight he could see the texture of her nipples in relief against the fabric. She hung the sweatshirt on the hook in her locker and closed it. "Back soon," she whispered.

Ten minutes later she came back—he noticed a flush on her throat and cheeks—"Got the extension!" she said, and opened her locker, and pulled her sweatshirt back on.

She wasn't conventionally attractive: on the short side, slender with average breasts, pale and wide-eyed, freckled, and with a slight tendency toward hairiness—a hint of pale mustache at the corners of her mouth, little wisps growing from the skin in front of her ears like a vague echo of a man's sideburns, and strangest of all, a soft, white down on her earlobes, so pale and translucent that you didn't notice it unless you got very close. A hint of mischief in her expression gave her the air of a pixie or a forest fairy—was that a dryad or a naiad?

Later, he watched her breasts sway gently above him as she moved at her own chosen rhythm.

"I was talking to David the other day… he says he's taking me to prom… you should think of going with someone too."

"I… should?"

"Yeah. For like… appearances. Like… Jennifer? Why don't you ask Jennifer?"

"I could."

"Or I think Natalie has no one to go with… or Wren…"

"Won't Wren go with Jason?"

"No… he's going with Caroline. She let him know she was a little more… available than Wren, you know."

"Okay… I'll ask Jennifer then."

* * *

The transit workers were involved in—not a strike but a slowdown; he had heard it argued over on the radio in his parents' kitchen every morning for several days—and so the buses were extremely slow and extraordinarily crowded. For added cruelty, the drivers would stop at random points along their route and sit for five minutes, just to increase everyone's aggravation. On one of these seemingly endless bus trips, he found himself next to Wren.

"Merciful heavens!" Wren exclaimed as the crowd boarding the bus further compacted those already on.

"Sorry," he said.

She smiled. "It's okay."

Like Lianne, she was a year ahead of him in school, so he didn’t really know her, though he knew who she was. “Since we seem to be getting forcibly acquainted, we might as well introduce ourselves.” He said his name.

“I know who you are,” she said.

“And I know you’re Wren.”

“Yes.”

The crowd shifted again; his arm pressed into hers. She was extraordinarily pretty, with clear blue eyes and brown hair with flashes of blonde that fell in a careless tumble down over her shoulders. The very casualness of her appearance, as if she never gave it a thought, made her somehow more beautiful than girls whose look seemed more studied. In the winter, he recalled, she wore an old brown duffel coat that hung slackly around her—it looked remarkably like the ancient coat his father wore when he shoveled snow from their driveway, not wanting to get one of his “good coats”—the ones he wore to the office—dirty. He recalled a line of poetry from somewhere: “Such sweet neglect more taketh me…” He sometimes read at random in the school anthology while his English teacher droned on.

The hiss of the doors, more people forced their way on, and now he and Wren were truly pressed up against each other.

“I’m wondering whether I should ask you to marry me,” he said, “otherwise I think we might be in a state of sin before the end of this trip.”

“I’m not Catholic.”

“Oh.” The bus shuddered to a halt, the people around them shifted their positions, sighed, muttered to themselves. He could feel the blood ticking in his throat as if marking the silent seconds.

“How about prom? Do you have a date for that?”

She squinted at him, a true, sizing-up squint, almost Clint Eastwood-ish. “We don’t even know each other.”

“Let’s get to know each other and then decide. Are you busy this weekend?”

“Not… really.”

“Perfect. We’ll go out, and if it goes okay, we’ll go to prom together.”

“I think I’d better start getting to the doors. My stop is coming up.”

“Good luck.”

MONITORING COMMITTEE NOTES

Subject has recently undergone extensive sessions with YaWei’s Viewpoint Correction chatbot focused on economic justice; the Committee feels the reference to labor action at the start of this section suggests the sessions have had some impact, but instead of expressing correct views on the matter, Subject identifies with the oppressors and attributes cruelty to the working class. This alone shows he is probably beyond remediation.

Subject then reverts to toxic male fantasy. Note the complete failure to create any sense of a genuine female character; her entire personality seems to be “she wants me.” And note again the white supremacist beauty standards: blue eyes, light-colored hair, etc.

Further references to reactionary artists—Clint Eastwood, the line of poetry—indicate that repeated Erasure and Reeducation sessions have failed to induce greater compliance in Subject.

* * *

On Saturday, he went by her house around noon to pick her up. There was nothing for it but to meet her parents. Wren answered the door, gave him a pained smile, and led him into the living room: bright white walls, clean lines, furniture that looked like it had been picked from the pages of a high-end design magazine. All around the walls hung small unframed canvases on which swirls of color interacted energetically with one another.

Her father struggled with what line to take. "So... what sort of music do you listen to?" He'd decided on "friendly" as opposed to "authoritarian," it seemed.

"Um... I listen to some of the angry rock music the kids are listening to these days." Wren's eyebrows shot up. "But mostly I like old jazz music. Chet Baker, Ella Fitzgerald, that kind of thing."

"Our son Peregrine plays the guitar. He's in some... rock band, we gather, or... punk rock band?"

He knew Wren's brother was four or five years older, and that his absence carried an aura of shame or disappointment. There was a pause.

"I'm admiring the paintings you have. It's cool when people have actual art, not just a print of Van Gogh's sunflowers or Monet's water lilies. It shows their taste."

He felt, somehow, the ice breaking. Wren's father smiled. "My wife paints those."

"Really?" He turned to her. "So you're—an artist, professionally?"

"I teach studio classes at the School of Design downtown and also make my own art. And Wren says you're going to the art gallery today?"

"That is the plan."

"Wonderful. I often go there at lunch, just to wander around and look at whatever catches my eye. It's quite close to the school, you know."

And suddenly they were all smiling, her parents ushering them out the door as if with a benediction.

"Goodness gracious!" Wren said as they sat on the bus. "Are you always like that?"

"Like what?"

"You know, like…" she made a complex series of interweaving gestures with her hands, "charming everyone."

"No. I don't know. Is that what I did?" She stared straight ahead. "I just try to get along with people."

She was silent for a minute, trying to remember whether she had told him her mother was an artist. "Did you know those were my mom's paintings?"

"No. How would I?"

"Did you guess?"

"No. I just genuinely admired them. Like I said, it's better than the usual sunflowers or water lilies."

A couple of weeks later, Wren had her only encounter with his parents. His mother, who was, as usual, moderately drunk, stared at her in glassy silence and finally asked if her family was related to some other family with the same name who lived in Vancouver and had made a fortune in the lumber industry. Wren said, "I don't think so." And his father seemed impressed that his son was dating such a good-looking girl and didn't say anything beyond, "So this is her."

MONITORING COMMITTEE NOTES

"…trying to remember whether she had told him her mother was an artist": this clause is remarkable, as it is the only time the reader is given a glimpse of a female character having a thought. Despite the third-person narration, which opens up the potential for conveying the interiority of multiple characters, this story stays chained to the male protagonist's perspective.

Nevertheless, Subject remains incapable of creating a rounded or convincing female character; all Wren can do is reflect the male main character's self-admiration back at him, calling him "charming."

While bourgeois artists like Van Gogh and Monet are not praised, there is no cogent critique of their work to help young readers form correct opinions. The absence of incorrect ideology does not equal the presence of correct ideology: this is a lesson Subject must learn.

* * *

They spent the summer together. Wren's parents were mostly at their cottage, and his parents were often at theirs, so one house at least was empty. When they grew tired of lying in bed together, they took the subway downtown and behaved like the urbane, sophisticated adults they imagined they would someday be, going to the art gallery, the museum, Shakespeare in the Park, and the movies. They loved the decadence of coming into the early show at around noon from the blazing sunlit heat outside and sitting in the chill air-conditioned darkness watching images flit across the screen, holding hands, making out, switching seats when they felt like it—there was usually no one else there—and then emerging a couple of hours later into the same blaze of sun, the same wall of heat, the sidewalks mostly empty, the still, drowsing city of a midday afternoon in midsummer—the middle, for them, of everything.

* * *

Late that September, on one of those last hot days, he saw her parents sitting on a bench outside the grocery store, eating ice cream. That image of them, parents whose children had all left home, gave an impression of emptiness, almost loss. He walked over.

"I hope it's not... awkward if I just say hello."

"No of course not."

"So nice to see you."

They ran through the standard pleasantries.

"I hope you're... all right?" her mother said at last. "What with Wren... going away to school, and all, and..."

"Oh, of course," he said. The breakup, when it came, had been straightforward, undramatic, an expected formality. "I never thought she would want to be shackled to a high school guy when she went away to university."

"No." Her mother paused. "But we really... liked you," her tone almost plaintive. They saw him as a nice, nonthreatening boy, affected but in a harmless way, as if he had absorbed the social mores of the 1950s music he claimed to love.

"Thank you." He meant it.

From across the parking lot, someone shouted his name. "Would you get the hell over here and help with the groceries?"

They turned, along with everyone else. His father was standing at the open back of the car, glaring at him.

"My father," he said to Wren's parents with a smile. "Duty calls."

"Indeed," said her father.

"If you're... speaking to her, and it's not too much to ask, maybe you'd just... say I said hello and give her my best?"

"Of course," her mother said.

"Who the hell are they?" his father demanded, making sure Wren's parents could hear.

"Just some people I know."

"Some people you know? They're adults. How do you know them?"

He hefted a couple of bags from the cart into the back of the car. "Does it really even matter to you?"

* * *

In October, he ran into Wren's mother at the art gallery gift shop. He was standing in an aisle with two different sketchbooks in his hands, looking from one to the other, when she came up and touched him on the shoulder.

"Hello."

"Oh—hello!" he said and laughed. "I'm stuck on that old question," shaking the notebooks, "the sunflowers or the water lilies."

She had the awkward feeling he was referring to some shared joke she had forgotten and simply said, "A tough choice." After an uncomfortable silence, as if forcing herself to speak, she asked, "Is everything... okay... at home?"

At first, he was baffled, but then remembered the scene in the grocery store parking lot. "Oh—you mean my father. Yes, fine. He basically hates everyone and everything, but he never does anything."

"Oh, I see." She paused, considered following that up, then changed direction. “We spoke to Wren a few weeks ago—we said you said hi.”

“Thank you. She wrote to me last week, so I’ll write back soon.” He again shook the two notebooks. “I’m thinking of sending one of these to her—for her birthday. She still does those little sketches, doesn’t she?”

“I’m sure she’ll appreciate it,” her mother said. “Whether sunflowers or water lilies.”

She felt there were some vaguely adult notions she ought to communicate to him: that first relationships never last, that he would move on, that things that seemed so huge and meaningful now would be completely forgotten, and couldn’t he see that? But she didn’t say anything.

She watched him rejoin a group of friends, noting that it consisted of both boys and girls and that he didn’t seem to be “with” any particular one of the girls. She imagined she would mention this meeting to Wren, casually, next time they talked, but Wren never asked about him and in a day or two her mother had forgotten this brief encounter.

MONITORING COMMITTEE NOTES

Here Subject does move away from the expected. Instead of more sex scenes chronicling the relationship with the second girl (“Wren”), he is deflected into these strange post-breakup scenes with her parents. It’s unclear what Subject is trying to accomplish, but it seems likely that at some rudimentary level he wishes to move his writing into an approved vein. Perhaps the female-authored “domestic fiction” piped into his cell while he sleeps has had some subliminal effect?

It is certainly odd that the character of the mother is suddenly given thoughts and feelings—nothing compared to the rich interior life lavished on the narcissistic male protagonist, but certainly a more complete vision of her humanity than anything provided for the two objects of his sexual desire.

The references to letter writing reveal another ongoing issue: Subject remains stuck in his own past, unable to reflect the technological (never mind the political) realities of the present day in his writing. This story feels as if it takes place in the late eighties or early nineties of the last century.

* * *

When he sent her the notebook (water lilies—it seemed the less ridiculous of the two), he included a letter.

My dearest Wren,

Thanks for your letter—it was great to hear from you. And happy birthday! I'm sure this letter won't arrive on the actual day, but I'm hoping it will be close. I've enclosed a little sketchbook as a gift. I think you're still doing the occasional drawing. (I get this information from your mother. I have a curious habit of running into your parents.)

You asked about school: it is awful. The teachers are the same, the classes are the same, only the students change. I am bored beyond words, desperate to move on with my life but stuck here for another year.

Home life is a drag, but I contrive to spend as little time around my parents as possible. You'll be pleased to know, maybe, that my father occasionally asks after you: "Ever hear from that girl? The cute one, Robin or something? No? Dumped you, did she? Can't say I'm surprised. She was way out of your league." (That is not an exact quote but a summary of the overall drift of his remarks.)

I feel as if I should leave a long blank space on the page here. I have been thinking so long about writing to you, and now I am writing *to you I find have nothing to say, or nothing that isn't obvious. I miss you—I suppose you could guess that. You maybe can't guess quite what you meant to me, though, in the desert of my life. I think often of that day on the bus, the crowd pressing us together, how struck I was by what I've come to think of as your careless beauty—the way you stood out without ever trying.*

There is a poem I always think of when I think of you; I thought of it at that moment on the bus, I've thought of it constantly since; it goes:

> *Give me a look, give me a face*
> *That makes simplicity a grace*
> *Robes loosely flowing, hair as free*
> *Such sweet neglect more taketh me*
> *Than all the adulteries of art*
> *They strike mine eye, but not my heart*

By Robert Herrick—or Ben Jonson?—but it seems to express my own feelings for you so perfectly, it's almost as if I wrote it—though of course I never could.

I have filled this letter up with myself and not even mentioned you, but I hope you are doing well. I'm sure you are. I won't ask if you're seeing anyone; not my business, and perhaps it doesn't matter anyway. Write to me when you can. Tell me about your classes, the people you're meeting, the books you're reading, everything. I feel like my mind is shriveling up and dying.

Missing you,

And he signed his name.

This letter never received a reply.

MONITORING COMMITTEE NOTES

If we suspected Subject of good intentions in a couple of earlier sections, that idea collapses here: we return to the pose of the hard-done-by male, the romantic self-image drenched in bathos. It is the hallmark of so much regressive art through the centuries—the man cruelly abandoned by the heartless woman he truly loved—and it is toxic to the point of repugnance.

Despite repeated Erasure sessions, Subject retains an astonishing recall for suppressed works of art, even managing to quote six complete lines of subversive poetry in the course of the “letter” that concludes the story. It is clear that more forceful techniques are required to ensure his compliance, and we refer to the Correction Department, which has done extensive, illuminating research in this field and produced a suite of recommendations.

CONCLUSION/RECOMMENDATION

The Committee does not need to restate the importance to society of writers who are able to create fiction that conveys approved values and inspires correct thought in readers. It is our considered opinion that in the case of this particular Subject, our efforts at reeducation and rehabilitation have failed, and he will never produce work that can forward the goals of the State.

RECO:

Subject to be reassigned out of Arts & Culture Dept. (subspecialty Writing) and into either:

1. Menial Dept. (we note there is a shortage in Menial Subspecialty Health Care and that shortage has been flagged

"Societal Interest HIGH"); or

2. Clerical Dept. (if something suitably low-level can be found, where incorrect opinions won't present much danger).

[Stamped] So ordered.

* * *

Discussion Questions

1. The story starts off by saying, “The purpose of literature in a well-ordered society is to train the minds of the young in the values approved by the State.” Do you agree? What is the “purpose” of literature?
2. The Monitoring Committee provides feedback about toxic male fantasy and shallow female characters in the writing. Do you agree with any of their assessments while reading the story? Did you agree with any of the assessments after they pointed them out?
3. To what extent do you think literature affects our opinions and perspectives of society? Should literature be a mirror to society or reflect a particular perspective of society?
4. One criticism of women in media as objects of desire is that they lack agency, and could just as well be replaced by a sacred relic with no difference in the story. Do you agree or disagree with this assessment, and does it apply to the women in this story as the Monitoring Committee suggests?
5. The Monitoring Committee also suggests the story deals in tropes and well-worn patterns. Is that a bad thing? Can a story of value be more of the same, with only a minor twist, and still be art of value? Does relying on those story patterns subconsciously perpetuate them?

* * *

Thirteen the Hard Way

Héctor Hernández

* * *

Content Disclosure: Low Intensity

* * *

The screams woke Mr. and Mrs. Emerson. They bolted out of bed and raced down the hall to their daughter's bedroom. The screams were coming from there.

It was still early—six a.m.—but darkness had given way to twilight. A soft spring light filtered through their daughter's window. Both parents, standing in the doorway of their daughter's room, saw their only child sitting upright in bed and staring in horror at her outstretched hands.

They were red with blood.

Her face was red with blood.

From the top of her head to her waist, she was red with blood.

Her pajamas, soaked, were sticking to her slender, adolescent frame.

Her parents let out sighs of relief. They had expected some horrific tragedy. Mrs. Emerson turned on the lights and walked calmly to her daughter, who would not stop screaming.

"Hush, Chelsea, hush. It's okay. Stop screaming."

But Chelsea couldn't stop. Her voice was controlled by her bloody outstretched hands. They made her scream.

Her mother took a harsher tone. "Chels! Stop! You'll wake the neighbors! It's still early."

Chelsea continued to scream.

Mrs. Emerson felt the pangs of compassion. She sat on the edge of the bed and embraced her child. Her harsh tone gave way to the soft caresses of soothing words.

"Hush, baby, hush. It's okay." She rocked her daughter gently side to side. "I know you're scared, honey, but it's going to be okay."

Chelsea finally stopped. "Okay? Okay? Are you crazy, Mom! How is this okay! I look like Carrie at her prom! How can this be okay!"

"Oh, sweetie. I—" Mrs. Emerson glanced at her husband—"*we* should have talked to you sooner and not waited so long. You're not a little girl anymore. We should have prepared you for this moment. You're going through a change, sweetie."

Chelsea struggled out of her mother's embrace. "What? You think I started my *period*? You think that's what this is? Mom, I had sex education class back in like fifth grade. I know what a period should look like. This isn't that!"

Her mother nodded in agreement. "You're right, honey. This isn't that. This is something different. This is…" She hesitated and glanced again at her husband.

He nodded slightly, encouraging her to go on.

"This is a… a rare condition, sweetie. It's called hematidrosis."

Her daughter's eyes grew to saucers. "I have a condition? Am I going to die?"

"Oh, no! No, honey. You're not going to die." Mrs. Emerson reached out and took her daughter's hand and stroked it. "It's harmless, really. It just means you sweat blood. That's all. It's not life-threatening. Believe me. You're not going to die. Come. Let's get you cleaned up. You'll feel much better after you've taken a shower, and I don't want you to be late for school."

"What! Are you insane! I'm not going to school like this! What if I start squirting blood all over my friends or my teachers? No way am I going to school—not today. Not EVER!"

Chelsea flopped back on her bed, grabbed her pillow, and smothered her face with it.

"Evelyn," said her husband. "Maybe it's a good idea for Chelsea to stay home today."

Chelsea poked her head out from under her pillow like a turtle and said, "Ya think!" then retreated.

Mrs. Emerson sighed. "Well, I guess I'm outnumbered." She threw up her hands in mock surrender. "Okay. You guys win." She leaned her face close to her daughter's pillow. "Sweetie, you can stay home today, BUT"—she tapped her index finger against the pillow—"knock, knock. If you're better by tomorrow, you *will* go to school. Is that understood young lady? I don't want you to use this as an excuse to play hooky."

Chelsea peeked out from under her pillow once again. A sullen expression signaled her reluctant agreement.

"All right," said Mrs. Emerson. "Now that we have that settled. Let's get you cleaned up."

* * *

When it was time for dinner, Chelsea refused to come out of the bathroom. The blood had not stopped flowing, and she had decided to stay in the tub, where she could continuously wash the red, oozing liquid off her body.

Her mother knocked on the door. “Honey, can I come in?”

There was no response. Mrs. Emerson entered.

Her daughter was submerged to her neck in a crimson pool of bathwater. Bloody tears streamed down her face. Chelsea spoke without looking at her mother. “It’s getting worse, Mom, not better.”

Her mother had held out hope, but now she had to admit that this episode was not going to be like the last one, which had lasted only an hour when Chelsea was three.

Chelsea turned a crimson face to her mother. “Mom, I’m scared. There’s so much blood. Don’t I need like a transfusion or something? A grown-up only has five liters of blood, and I’m not a grown-up, so I have a lot less.”

Chelsea’s thirteenth birthday was this week. *Was that a coincidence?* Mrs. Emerson didn’t think so. The physiological change in her daughter was likely causing an adverse reaction in the unit she was wearing. Complete degradation would probably occur in a couple of days. She and her husband would need to prepare another unit, but they would have to time it just right.

“No, honey. You don’t need a transfusion,” said Mrs. Emerson. “Your birthday will be this Thursday. I’m pretty sure things will get better after that.”

Her daughter’s plaintive voice barely made a ripple in the air when she whispered, “Promise?”

Never make a promise you can’t keep ran through Mrs. Emerson’s head, but what else could she say as her daughter’s beseeching eyes locked with hers? So she said that which would soothe and comfort: “I promise.”

* * *

Wednesday night after work, Mr. Emerson drove to the secret underground cryogenic storage vault in the backwoods. He started the thawing process for one of the two units stored there. The following day, he would leave work early, return to the vault, retrieve the thawed unit, and arrive home before dark.

* * *

Thursday evening, Mrs. Emerson knocked on her daughter’s bathroom door.

A resigned voice spoke. “Come in.”

Mrs. Emerson entered.

Her daughter was standing in front of the mirror. A towel was wrapped around her bony frame. “The blood stopped. I guess I should be happy about that.”

The skin on Chelsea’s exposed arms glowed a bioluminescent bluish-green. The texture was scaly, like a snake. Her hairless head was a smooth bulb with holes where her ears and nose should have been. Her eyes were black and beady, her mouth a slit.

“I don’t have hema… hema…”

“Hematidrosis,” said Mrs. Emerson. “No, honey, you don’t. That was a lie, and I’m sorry for telling it.”

“I’m not human. Am I?”

Mrs. Emerson smiled at her beautiful daughter. She looked just like her mother, the way Mrs. Emerson remembered her twelve years ago, the last time she saw her. The resemblance was striking. She thought her daughter was taking the situation well, considering.

"No, sweetie. You're not human."

"I didn't think so." Chelsea continued staring into the mirror. She thought of her friend Shelby who had freaked when she had gotten her first pimple—on the tip of her nose. Chelsea had fretted the same would happen to her. She wasn't concerned now with pimples on her nose. She didn't have one.

After the bleeding had stopped and her old skin had sloughed off, Chelsea hadn't been scared. It was strange, but looking in the mirror, she actually liked what she saw. It seemed a familiar face, a comforting face, a face that held memories of long ago.

"I'm a Squamatian. Aren't I?"

"Yes, sweetie. You are."

Chelsea knew about Squamatians. Her school textbook said a fleet of thousands of ships carrying Squamatians fled their planet shortly before their sun burned through its hydrogen fuel and ballooned into a red giant, gobbling up their planet. One of the ships with two thousand Squamatians became separated from the fleet when it jumped from one galaxy to another through a wormhole. That ship was damaged and ended up landing on Earth decades before Chelsea was born.

At first, the Squamatians were feared, but eventually, they gained the trust of humans by sharing their advanced technology and scientific knowledge. It wasn't long after Squamatian science cured cancer that Squamatians were allowed to live freely among humans. But things changed when another alien race tried to invade Earth. By that time, humans had built incredibly powerful weapons based on Squamatian technology, and the alien invaders were repelled, but that close call had a profound effect. The mood of the world turned against the Squamatians. They were, after all, an alien species, and so they fell under suspicion. Nobody trusted them now. Governments around the world demanded that the Squamatians be moved far from humans, so they were rounded up and relocated to the moon.

“How come I’m not on the moon with the other Squamatians?”

“Because your mother and father asked us to keep you here on Earth.”

Chelsea turned at the sound of her father’s voice, her human father. He was standing in the hallway, holding a large package wrapped in festive paper with a large bow on top—her birthday present.

“I worked closely with your mother—your biological mother—on several classified government projects. She was a very intelligent and perceptive individual. She sensed a tide shift in the world’s mood toward Squamatians after we defeated that other alien race, and she and I, along with many other of my fellow scientists who were sympathetic to the Squamatians, secretly developed genetically engineered skin that would allow a Squamatian to pass for human.

“The original plan was to make suits of skin for you and your parents, but we got word through secret sources that Squamatians would soon be rounded up and deported to the moon. There was only enough time to make a small suit for you.

“Many of my fellow scientists pleaded with the government for your parents to remain on Earth. We knew that an argument on humanitarian grounds wouldn't be persuasive, so we explained that your parents were vital to the research we were doing, but the government would make no exceptions, and your parents were deported.

"You were a year old at the time, and you have been passing as human ever since." Mr. Emerson approached Chelsea and held out her present. "Happy birthday, sweetie."

Chelsea took the package, undid the bow, and opened the box. Inside was a fresh, new, three-piece suit of skin: head (including neck), "jacket" with "sleeves" extending to the fingers, and "pants" extending down to the toes.

"This one should last you twenty years."

Chelsea knew she should wear this "suit," this false identity, but she had mixed feelings, especially now that she knew who she really was. She wondered about the Squamatians her own age living on the moon. Were they happy? Did they joke and laugh and gossip and tease each other? Or were they always sad because they had been banished from Earth and deprived of all the things Chelsea took for granted like movie theaters, shopping malls, and amusement parks?

And what about their future? What kind of future awaited them on the moon?

Chelsea suddenly felt guilty about the unlimited opportunities that awaited her here on Earth. She had so far escaped a harsh future on the moon but only because she had lived a lie these last twelve years. She hadn't known it was a lie, of course. But now she did. Would it be wrong to continue that lie?

She ran a finger over the sleeve of her new "jacket." It was soft to the touch, a familiar texture, a safe texture, a texture of unlimited opportunities.

“Come on, honey,” said her mother. “Let’s get this on you.”

As Mrs. Emerson closed the bathroom door, Chelsea reminded herself to talk to Shelby tomorrow at school for advice on how to avoid a pimple on her nose.

* * *

Discussion Questions

1. Chelsea is passing as human in order to have a better life. Are there real-life versions of passing? If so, what are other real-life examples of people “passing” and what reasons do they have for doing so?
2. If you were offered a better life for passing as something you are not, would you do it? Would it matter which trait you had to lie about to pass?
3. Do you think Chelsea’s parents should have told her ahead of time she was passing as human? At what age do you think they should have trusted her with that information? If she could go her whole life without ever knowing her true identity, would it be better to never tell her?
4. Now that Chelsea knows she is a Squamatian, to what extent should she learn about and embrace her culture? Given the hostile environment toward Squamatians, what advice would you give her as a parent?
5. If you were Chelsea’s alien parents, would you have given her up so she could stay on Earth and have a chance at a better life?

* * *

Claim

Fiona Ennis

* * *

Content Disclosure: Sexual Innuendo, Depiction of Sexism; Eating Disorders

* * *

In the tiny room that's used as a staff canteen in Halden Insurance, you take two Ryvita out for your lunch, snap one in half, then put the bigger half back in your lunchbox. Maura licks the egg mayonnaise that's spilling out of her sandwich as she watches you slice a tomato. She'll probably make some comment about you being too thin again. Her dark blonde fringe, sprayed to the last, stands up straight over her forehead, and you can see where the teeth of the comb were pulled through the strands. The rest of her hair is backcombed. She thinks she looks like one of the Bangles or something. The last time she gave you a lift home when it was raining, she played "Manic Monday" and then fast-forwarded the tape to "Walk Like an Egyptian," doing the hand actions when she stopped at the traffic lights. Seán, your boss, asked her last week to tone down the hair a bit, look more professional when she's talking to clients, not that her hair bothered him as such, he'd said, but she had to think of the company image. Most days she slicks her hair back with that wet-look gel, but not today, as she's heading out for drinks after work. Not that he'll say anything. She'll probably end up in Club Tempo after. It's free entry for women on Thursdays. Ladies' Night. She'll be dying in the morning again.

The kettle shudders on the countertop and clicks just as Seán walks in. His jacket is hanging off him. You don't know why he always carries a copy of *The Irish Times* to the canteen each day. He never ends up reading it.

He nods at you. "The usual?"

"Yep. Thanks."

He puts a teaspoon of coffee into the red mug and another into his special mug.

Maura points a frosted pink nail at your plate. "Don't know how you can be full on one and a half Ryvita. Still, it's a quarter more than you had yesterday, isn't it, Niamh? And Seán, since you're asking, I'll have a cuppa too."

He opens the box of tea and throws a bag in the yellow mug with the chip off the side. "Sure, that's why she's so lovely and thin, isn't it?"

Maura raises her tadpole eyebrows.

He smiles at you, and his eyes graze over your legs. You pull at your pencil skirt a bit.

Then he says, "Did you know Greta Garbo used to insure her legs for millions?"

Maura puts down the crust of her sandwich and takes out a Penguin bar. "Yeah, I heard Tina Turner does that. Dunno if it's true. Imagine if we got a call from someone around here asking for that?"

He brings over the coffee. When Maura looks at him, he goes back for her tea.

As he sits down beside you, you move your chair and say, "Imagine the actuaries working out that one?"

He laughs. "Ah, I don't think the premiums would be too high somehow."

Maura is in the bathroom, fixing up her makeup before she hits the pub. The office phone rings. It's ten to five. Typical. This had better not hold you up. Your stomach is growling, and you have to do your aerobics video before dinner.

You say, "Hello, Halden Insurance. Niamh speaking. How may I help you?"

A woman's voice says, "Ah, Niamh. Glad I got you before closing. It's Margaret, the bishop's secretary."

"What can I do for you, Margaret?" The diocese is a huge account. This could take ages.

"Well, we're trying to insure against all sorts of risks. There are a lot of people against the Church these days."

"Dreadful, isn't it?" You're glad she doesn't know you voted in favor of legalizing divorce last year, not that the referendum passed. Seán had told Maura not to be attending those pro-divorce protests in town, in case it got back. He doesn't know she headed off on the bus to that rally in Dublin, bringing all the flyers with her that she'd copied on the office machine.

Margaret's voice is barely loud enough to hear. "People are making all sorts of allegations against a few of the priests."

"Imagine, after they've given up their lives for the

Church."

"We'll have to take out some unusual cover, in the interests of the diocese, and the priests too, of course."

"Right. What kind of policy, Margaret?" Your shoe is chafing your right heel, and you slip your shoe off and dangle it from your toes.

"One that protects the diocese against liability arising from sexual abuse of children by priests."

"Excuse me?" Your shoe falls to the floor.

"Is there a problem?"

"No, no, of course not."

* * *

You knock on Seán's office door. It's after five, but he always works late.

"Come in." He's sitting at his desk and smiles when you enter. "Shouldn't you have gone home by now? I'm working you too hard."

"Pay raise?"

He lets out a breath through his teeth. "Yeah, right. Feels like the economy is never going to pick up."

"I need to talk to you about something."

He indicates for you to take a seat, then sits back in his chair and rakes his fingers through his hair.

You sit and pull your skirt over your knees. "I just got a call from Margaret, the bishop's secretary."

"Oh yeah?"

How are you going to put this? "She was inquiring about a policy to insure the diocese against liability for sexual abuse of children by priests."

"What's that now?" He sits forward and puts his hands on the desk.

"A policy to protect against liability for sex abuse of children by priests."

"Right, right." He rubs his forehead.

"So, what do we do?"

"Do?"

"Like report it?"

He taps his pen on the desk, then stares at it for a moment. "No, we won't be doing that."

"They could be near kids."

"Niamh, we protect against liability. Just because we insure a house against fire, doesn't mean the house will go on fire. This is just protection in case claims are made. Insurance 101."

"You don't believe that."

"I do. Anyway, this is confidential. You're not to mention it to anyone."

He cannot be serious.

He says, "I mean it, Niamh."

"I have to."

His neck is mottled. "You can't cast aspersions on people's characters, least of all on our clients. You'd better keep it to yourself." Then he opens a desk drawer. "I've got a stack of CVs here from girls just like you. You'd have no prospects on the dole queue. You know yourself factories are closing up and down the country."

You watch as he closes the drawer. It feels like it happens so slowly.

Then he looks at you, like really looks at you. "Niamh, I don't want to lose you. Just do the paperwork tomorrow; there's a good girl. But keep any documents relating to it out of Maura's sight. You know what she's like."

You get up from the chair and close the door behind you.

* * *

After the forty-minute walk home from work, you let yourself into your bedsit. You hate waking up in the same room as your fridge and TV, and the rent is pretty high considering the flowery wallpaper is peeling, and the carpet is lifting away from the skirting board. A loud grumble comes from your stomach, but you've always been like that, wanting to eat because something's eating you. You preheat the oven, change into your T-shirt and tracksuit pants, and rewind your Jane Fonda video. This should take your mind off things. By the time the video is over, your dinner should be ready. You take a Lean Cuisine Sweet and Sour Chicken out of the freezer. At least you don't need a microwave for this flavor or for the Chicken Fried Rice one, even though the rice sometimes gets hard in the oven and tastes like little pellets. Still, at least you know what's in them: three hundred calories, so two-thirds of it today equals two hundred calories. You've learned not to leave the third you don't want on your plate. Well, it's not that you don't want it, but you always put it in the bin before you even sit down. You peel off the film, pop it out of the container, and put it in the oven. Then you move the tiny table and chair nearer your bed so you can do your workout.

You do your waist-whittlers, and even though you're sweating and trying to concentrate on the exercises, you keep replaying that conversation with Seán. Maura would have stood up to him. And she would have done something already. Why are you so useless? Utterly useless. You put your mat on the carpet to do your inner thigh exercises. You hate these. You do two, then you stop doing them and just lie there, even though Jane is being really encouraging on the TV. You stare at the big brown stain on the ceiling, just near the light, then get up and turn off the video, not even noting where you were on the tape. You've never stopped it partway through before.

When your dinner is ready, you sit down, don't even bother scraping off the third you don't usually eat. You plow through it, rather than your usual slow mouthfuls, and when you've finished, you can feel it just sit there. You go into your bathroom, bend over the toilet bowl, and retch. It's been a long time since you've done this, you've been so good at not doing it, so good at controlling everything that goes in so that you don't have to do this anymore, but your body remembers what to do. You don't even need to stick two fingers in your throat, like you used to when you started doing this back when you were twelve. The food just comes up your throat and plops out, the curry, mixed with acid, burning your throat. Lumps of chicken come up too. Grains of rice float in the bottom of the bowl. When no more will come up, you sit on the lino in front of the sink, crying, your arms around your legs. Not this again. You've been so good for so long. You can't go back to this.

* * *

Every day, while you sat on the primary school bus, staring at the fields go by, Leanne from your class would get onto you again about being fat, calling you Titanic and stuff, and who was she to talk? As if she had the perfect body or something. The last time she fell out with her two best friends, Neasa and Cara, they told everyone she stuffed her bra with tissues. Not that they were all that either: Cara had one blue eye and one brown eye, and Neasa's hair was always greasy. They weren't too bad to you, though, didn't really call you names, but they laughed along with Leanne just the same. The day before you started making yourself sick after eating, Leanne had sat behind you on the bus and called you names while you stared at the glop in the corner of the black rubber around the window. David Nolan, who you had fancied all year, wasn't in the backseat where he usually sat. You'd got a seat near the front, and David had sat opposite and smiled at you. You hadn't imagined that. He'd been looking at you in class for the past few weeks, but on the bus that day, when Leanne started calling you Fatso really loudly, he got up and walked to the backseat, to the rest of the cool sixth-class crowd, who picked old cigarette butts off the floor that were there from the town runs and smoked them.

Your cheeks were burning. You didn't want to go on like this anymore, wearing an enormous skirt with an elastic waist. Your mum was always on at you about your weight, and even your auntie, who usually nudged her to stop, kept telling you how she had lost loads of weight by walking every day, so you decided to get off the bus early and walk a good part of the way home. Alan, the bus driver, could drop you at the sign that said three miles to your townland. That would be a good start. Your stop was the last one on the journey home every day. Leanne's stop was second last, and her house looked rundown. Her mum had run off with someone; everyone knew that, even though she said her mum was modeling in Paris. Every day, for the last part of the journey, when everyone except you and Leanne had left the bus, Alan, the driver, asked her to sit in the front seat and chat with him. He was in his thirties, which seemed ancient back then. He was always kind to you though.

When you reached the sign for your townland, before he'd called Leanne up to talk to him, you said, "Can you let me off here?"

He said, "Why?"

"I want the exercise."

"Won't your mum be worried about you?"

"She won't be home until half five anyway."

He stopped the bus and opened the door. "Pop out so. And Niamh, don't let that name-calling get to you. They're only jealous because you've a pretty face."

You looked at your feet as you walked down the steps. "Thanks."

The bus lurched forward and drove out the road where there'd been no houses for ages. You adjusted your schoolbag on your back. It was a pity you hadn't had P.E. that day; you would have had your runners with you instead of your hard patent shoes.

The next morning when you got off the bus, Neasa and Cara stopped you. Leanne was standing over by the school gate. They nodded at you to wait with them until everyone else had gone. Class wouldn't start for another fifteen minutes.

Neasa said, "We need you to come with us to Mrs. Crawford and tell her what that bus driver has been doing."

You put your schoolbag on the ground for a minute. Your shoulders still hurt from carrying it the day before. "What do you mean?"

"Leanne says he's always looking at her and getting her to come up and talk to him after everyone has gone. Yesterday, after you got off the bus early, he did stuff to her."

"What kind of stuff?"

Neasa moved a bit nearer. “He was touching her.”

You looked over at Leanne, leaning against the gate. “She’s lying.”

Cara said, “What?”

“He’s never called her up to talk to him. And I didn’t get off the bus early. Why would I do that?”

Neasa pushed her fringe back from her face. “Why would she lie?”

“She stuffs her bra with tissues. And she said her mum is a model in Paris. How can you believe a word she says?”

They looked over at her, then at each other.

Neasa said, “Glad we talked to you. We could have got in a heap of trouble over this.” Then she walked up to Leanne and kicked some gravel at her. “You’re a dirty liar.”

That evening, even though you’d brought your runners with you, you didn’t get off the bus early to walk home. But after everyone else had gone, you watched how Alan looked at Leanne in the mirror and felt guilt wriggle its way through you and take hold. That evening after your mum served you chicken and veg, you went to the bathroom and put your fingers down your throat.

* * *

It’s after lunch, and Maura has perked up a bit. She was hungover all morning and put her head down on her desk a few times, but after a Tayto sandwich and some Fanta, she’s coming back to herself.

Seán’s door is closed, but she keeps her voice low. “I’m never drinking again. I mean it this time.”

You say, “Yeah, right.”

“Anyway, what’s up with himself? He barely said a word at lunchtime, not that I'm complaining."

"Dunno." You've finished working on the policy for Margaret, and the documents are in an envelope on your desk, ready to post, but you can't bring yourself to seal the envelope.

Maura looks at you. "You're very quiet today. Why'd you stay on after I left at five? You're usually out of here like a hot snot."

"Just had to talk to him about something."

She comes over. "Hope he didn't try it on. I've seen the way he gawps at you. I'm here if you want to tell me anything."

You look at her for what feels like a whole minute. Then you pick up the envelope containing the policy and feel your fingers draw out the documents.

"I mean it," she says. "I can stand up to him."

You slide the documents back in and put the envelope down. "No, everything's okay, Maura."

"You don't look like it is."

"Don't worry. I'm fine. Thanks though."

"If you're sure." She goes back to her desk. "I could do with some air. I'm off to post some documents. Have you got anything to go there?"

"Yep."

You seal the envelope, hand it to her, and she walks out the door. You almost run after her, but instead, you go to the bathroom, pressing your forehead against the door. Then you lean over the toilet, and when you vomit, only a small piece of Ryvita comes up. It won't flush away.

* * *

This story is a part of our legacy-of-excellence program, first printed in the After Dinner Conversation—August 2021 issue.

Discussion Questions

1. If you worked for an insurance company, would you be willing to insure a diocese against sexual abuse allegations? Are there some things you shouldn't be able to buy insurance against?
2. The narrator lied for the bus driver because she knew it would hurt the story of her school bully. Given the various factors, how do you judge the narrator for her actions?
3. The narrator's boss implies he would fire her for the ethical issues she has against insuring the church against sexual abuse charges. What (*if anything*) should the narrator have done in response to the threat and why?
4. What exactly are the mental health issues the narrator has, and what would be the best steps/realizations for her to move forward to being a healthier individual?
5. Are there any additional questions you would want to ask before issuing sexual assault insurance for the church? What answers would permit, or preclude, you from issuing the insurance?

* * *

Author Information

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Peter Mare is a nonprofit professional working in environmental advocacy. He has degrees in philosophy and international development and writes speculative fiction and satire. He lives with his family in Northern California where he dreams of building an agrarian utopia, but is prepared to settle for his thriving garden of thistles and dandelions.

Reformation

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Thirteen the Hard Way

Héctor Hernández received a bachelor's degree in civil engineering and worked nearly twenty-seven years for the county of Los Angeles, primarily administering construction contracts. He is now retired and has recently added writing to his list of retirement activities, which include reading, running, competitive archery, and (most importantly) relaxing.

Claim

Dr. Fiona Ennis lectures in literature and philosophy at the Waterford Institute of Technology, Ireland. She has won the Molly Keane Creative Writing Award and her work has been published in *Sonder*, *The Honest Ulsterman*, and a number of anthologies. Her fiction has also been shortlisted for the Bristol Short Story Prize and highly commended in the Manchester Fiction Prize and the Seán O Faoláin International Short Story Award.

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